

# A Different Path: Not the Herald

by PrettyFrog

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Summary: Twist in time: They claim he was chosen. Sent by the Maker. A destined leader in a time of chaos. The only hope for a world ravaged by war, demons, Blight, ancient magic, and Orlesian fashion sense. What is up with those masks? And the helmeted versions, how do those people see out of those to fight? Their blind spots are the size of some nations. What were we talking about again?

## 1. Chapter 1

Kathan headed down the flight of stairs. Kas was on a tear again, and the last thing he wanted was to be within earshot. They were not getting paid enough to be around this many people wanting to kill each other. At least nobody had been set on fire yet. That he knew off. It was the temple of ashes, right?

He was debating sneaking out of the temple and finding a tavern when he heard voices. That jackass templar was looming over a slight elven lass, who was backing away, her face scared. He took a couple steps forward and caught the man by the shoulder. For a moment, he considered putting him through the wall. "There you are, sis. Been looking everywhere for you."

The girl gave him a surprised and relieved look. The templar started to try to pull away. "Sister?"

Bones ground beneath his fingers as he tightened his grip. "What, you don't see the family resemblance?" He dug his nails in, making the templar gasp in pain, and then glanced at the girl and rolled his eyes. "Templars."

The little brown elf girl smiled. "I got turned around on that last staircase. There are entirely too many staircases."

Frankly he'd like to find whoever built the place and bang them

around a bit. "And low doors." He moved the templar out of the way, and gestured at the girl. "Come on, let's head back up."

The templar sputtered a bit as Kathan led the girl out of the hall, and Kathan gave him a pointed look. The man subsided.

They hadn't gone far when she looked up at him. "Sister?"

He shrugged. "Cousin didn't sound quite threatening enough." The girl might weigh a hundred pounds soaking wet and wearing a suit of plate mail.

"Appreciate the help."

"You good from here?" Skulking about in dark corners was going to get her in trouble. He thought about offering to accompany her, but Kas would get pissed if she thought he was taking another job.

"Should be."

He hesitated. He could hear Kas's voice now, yelling at him about adopting stray cats. But dammit, the girl'd been in trouble and she was only tiny. "You get caught spying again, tell them you're with Valo-kas."

"Who says I was spying?" She actually looked surprised.

Kathan winked at her before walking away. This is why people should leave it to the professionals. Maybe he'd look her up later, see who'd sent her. Had to pay better than their current work. Might even be a good fight or two in it instead of all this sitting around while people talked at each other.

#

He stuffed the last bite of the flatbread roll into his mouth and dusted his hands off. Chipmunk, the little Dalish girl, certainly could cook. Maybe he'd see how she felt about taking up the mercenary life. If he had to eat Ashaad's 'Ferelden Surprise' one more time he was going to stab the man. And if he had to listen to Kaariss while eating it, he was going to mutiny.

#

"Kathan." He turned at the sound of his name being called.

"Hey there, Chipmunk." He nodded, and gestured for her to sit with him.

She did so. "I saw you sparring with some templars. I want to know what they're talking about when their superiors aren't around." She met his eyes. "And so do you, which is why you were holding back and letting them win. Making them overconfident."

A slow smile came to his face. "Well now, ya might actually be getting better at this spying gig."

"And you aren't as big a knucklehead as you pretend." She answered his smile. "You share what you've learned, I'll do the same."

"Deal." He held his hand out, and she shook it.

#

"Hang on..." Kathan shook his head. "Who are you and what the hell are you even talking about?"

The elven man narrowed his eyes. "I am giving you a polite warning. Quiyala is not prey for your Qun."

He rubbed his horns, and looked down at the smaller man. "Alright, just for the sake of clarifying..." He tilted his head. "Are you trying to threaten me?"

"Stupid oaf." The elf turned and stalked away.

"Yeah." Kathan nodded as he watched the elf go. "Pretty sure he was trying to threaten me." He shrugged, and started for the stairs. Sounds of a scuffle caught his attention, and he walked into a corridor to see a woman in templar armor and a woman in mage robes starting to square off. He narrowed his eyes. "Hey."

"What?" The templar spat when she turned towards him.

"Is this foreplay, or something I need to break up?" Kathan waved a hand.

"What?" It was the mage who asked this time, her face utterly scandalized.

"Cause if it's foreplay, I'm gonna have to ask you to wait a bit while I go get popcorn." He gestured haphazardly over his shoulder. "And maybe sell some tickets."

The templar snorted. The mage rolled her eyes and then laughed. "Apologies, good ser. Tempers are..." The mage sighed.

"Maker watch over you." The templar gave him a small bow before walking away. A moment later, the mage was walking away in the opposite direction.

Kathan waited for them both to vanish, then went to go see what Chipmunk was up to.

#

"I can't believe you're actually drinking that dwarven stuff."

The blond man laughed. "Puts hair on your chest. You could use some." The man gave him an appreciative look.

Kathan smirked. "You know they actually put fungus in it."

"The deep mushrooms give it that special 'who or what did I do last night' kick."

"What's the fun in not remembering?"

"Good point."

He was about to order himself another glass of the Fereldan when he saw his sister enter the room. "Shit."

She stalked towards him. "You're supposed to be working."

"Shokrakor relieved me an hour ago."

"Then you should be sleeping." Kas folded her arms and glared. "Not lolling about a tavern getting drunk. Get back to your post."

"I'm going, I'm going." He started to get up as she stalked off to go yell at Kaariss and Taarlok.

"I'll walk back with you." The human paid for their drinks. "Your boss?"

"Worse. My big sister."

"Wow."

"Tell me about it."

#

"So if I did want to hire your group to..." The blond man cut off. "You hear something?"

"Someone shouting." Kathan tilted his head. He was pretty sure the sound had come from the staircase, but... "I'll take the stairs, you check the corridor."

"Er..." The blond man hesitated. "Okay."

#

He came down the corridor, and saw a familiar face coming his way. "Chipmunk."

"Knucklehead." Quiyala nodded. "Did you hear..."

There was another shout. They looked at each other and then headed in opposite directions.

#

Someone was waving a sword at him. He fumbled, trying to find his blades. How did he get outside? And what was that smell? The soldiers moved towards him and he tried to pick himself up. A wave of nausea hit him, and then everything went black.

#

He stared up at the two women. "Ya think this is my fault?" What the hell were they even talking about? How could the Conclave be destroyed? What had been in that beer?

The dark haired woman with the scar grabbed his hand, showing the strange mark. "Explain this."

Kathan all but growled in frustration. He'd been hoping they could explain it. And where the hell was Kas? "It's my hand."

"I know it's your..." The woman glared at him. "The mark."

For a moment, he thought she was going to go for her sword. "I dunno. Ain't seen it before in my life." This all had to be some kind of misunderstanding. Any minute now, Kas was going to walk in and start yelling at everyone.

"You're lying."

The red haired woman stepped forward. "We need him, Cassandra."

He was in trouble. He knew trouble when he saw it, and this was definitely trouble. Or maybe she was definitely trouble. Same thing at the moment really. "So now what?"

"Do you remember what happened? How this began?" The red haired woman looked down at him.

Coming back from the tavern. He'd sent the blond guy down the corridor. And then... "I remember running. From, not too. Something or things were chasing me and then..." Bits and pieces blended together, and none of it made any sense. What had been chasing him? "A woman?"

"A woman?" Well, that got interest out of both of them. Something was going on here. Bits and pieces of memory danced tantalizingly out of reach. If that was Cassandra, the other one must be Leliana. But what the hell did they want with him?

#

They chained him up, pointed swords, and yanked him around. And now the dark haired woman... Cassandra... was asking for his help. And the sky was green. He wasn't sure there was enough black powder in all Thedas to turn the sky green. He took a deep breath and nodded to Cassandra. "Alright."

"Then...?" She looked at him as though she barely dared to hope.

"I'll do what I can." He got back to his feet. Kas was going to kill him. She was going to stab him to death with his own horns. "Whatever I can." Maybe he'd get lucky and the green sky would kill him before his sister found him.

Kathan followed Cassandra out of Haven. People were staring. That much he was used to. Cassandra cut his hands free. "There will be a trial. I can promise no more. Come, it is not far."

Trial. Kas was going to kill him for not demanding up front money, and they thought he was worried about a trial?

#

She yelled at him to stay back. He'd was doing exactly that when a second demon climbed from the ground and headed towards her back. Shit. He looked around and saw part of one the weapon racks that had

been on the bridge. Kathan let out a shrill whistle as he dove for it, and saw the demon turn towards him. He came up with two long knives in his hands and grinned.

#

Cassandra pulled her sword out of the demon and turned to see where the other one had gone. The qunari man kicked it to free the knife he'd found, and wrinkled his nose as it disintegrated. He then turned towards her, a weapon in each hand. She stepped towards him, pointing her sword at his heart. "Drop your weapons. Now."

He gave her a disbelieving look. Then he shrugged, flipped the knives in his hands, and offered them both to her hilt first with a somewhat cheeky smile. "Yours if you want them."

It occurred to her that if he'd wanted to put up a fight, he'd had plenty of opportunity. His sheer size alone made him formidable. "Wait." And she might have been in trouble without his assistance. "I cannot protect you, and I cannot expect you to be defenseless." Had he chosen to run while her back was turned, he could have been half a mountain away by now. "I should remember you agreed to come willingly." And he'd made no attempt to use the weapons on her.

Both knives twirled back, and were stuck into his belt. "After you." He gave a half bow. She nodded, and started up the path.

#

More demons. A half dozen soldiers. A dwarf with a crossbow. And a guy shooting bolts of lightning out of a staff. The woman beside him lifted her shield and charged. Kathan followed. He flung his dagger into the face of a demon coming up behind the mage, then caught the hilt as he passed and stabbed it into another. Free to move, the elven mage gestured, and lightning arced between the demons.

The last demon seemed to melt away. The elven mage turned and grabbed his hand. "Quickly, before more come thorough."

Kathan let the smaller man pull him forward and press the mark up against the rift. Something just... happened. There was a rift... and then there just kind of wasn't. He looked down at his hand. "What did you do?"

"I did nothing. The credit is yours."

He was pretty sure that was at least part bullshit, but hey, magic wasn't exactly his strong suit. "I closed that thing? How?"

"Whatever magic opened the Breach in the sky also placed that mark upon your hand." The elven man shrugged. "I theorized the mark might be able to close the rifts that have opened in the Breach's wake - and it seems I was correct."

Cassandra approached, sheathing her blade. "Meaning it could also close the Breach itself."

"Possibly." He nodded to Kathan. "It seems you hold the key to our salvation."

"Good to know." Kathan was interrupted from forming his next question by the dwarf joining the conversation. "Here I thought we'd be ass-deep in demons forever." He smiled and gestured at himself. "Varric Tethras: Rogue, storyteller, and occasionally unwelcome tagalong."

"That's..." He was pretty sure he'd heard that name somewhere before. "A nice crossbow you have there."

"Ah, isn't she? Bianca and I have been through a lot together." The look the dwarf gave said crossbow was disturbingly tender.

"You named your crossbow Bianca?" Kathan rubbed at one of his horns.

"Of course. And she'll be great company in the valley."

Cassandra immediately began arguing with Varric, and lost rather quickly when he pointed out they were outnumbered and facing demons. Both of which were rather good points. The elf mage was Solas. And he was apparently the only reason Kathan was still alive. Nice to know somebody knew something about this mess. Maybe.

#

"So none of you are actually in charge here." He was really starting to feel like headbutting something. Or someone. Several someones. Mostly this chantry fellow. Arguing over elections while there was a hole in the sky? Seriously.

"You killed everyone who was in charge." The guy in the robes actually wagged a finger at him. "Call a retreat, Seeker. Our position here is hopeless."

And now they were all arguing about how to get to the giant hole in the sky. He was about to sigh and take up knitting when the situation got much, much worse. They all started looking at him to make the decision. Well, shit.

Rule seven. When in doubt, charge.

#

He drove the knives into a shade, then twisted to fling one into another demon. Kathan recovered the dagger as he headed in to the next rift. Soldiers were already there, fighting. He moved in alongside Cassandra, his blades backing up her sword.

The last demon vanished, and Kathan lifted his hand. It felt really weird, but it did the trick. "Lady Cassandra." A man who had the look of somebody in charge walked towards them. "You managed to close the rift. Well done."

"Do not congratulate me, Commander." Cassandra nodded in Kathan's direction. "This is the prisoner's doing."

"Is it?" He gave her an appraising look. "I hope they're right about you. We've lost a lot of people getting you here."

"You ain't the only one hoping that." Kathan caught a glimpse of a smile on Solas's face before the man returned to his normal polite expression.

The guy leading the soldiers nodded. "We'll see soon enough, won't we?" He nodded and pointed. "The way to the temple should be clear. Leliana will try to meet you there."

"Then we'd best move quickly." Cassandra nodded, and took a deep breath. "Give us time, Commander."

"Maker watch over you." He nodded. "For all our sakes."

Kathan shrugged, and fell into step behind Cassandra. Lot of folks weren't going home tonight. He glanced down at his hand. Hopefully, it would be worth it.

#

"This is your chance to end this. Are you ready?"

"I hope you've got really long ladder. Maybe a trebuchet?" Seriously, how tall did these people think he was, anyway?

Solas gestured at the rift in the area below them. "No. This rift was the first, and it is the key."

Kathan nodded, and started down the path. The entire place smelled like burnt ass. Idly, he found himself wondering if the blond guy had made it out, and then he stumbled slightly. The blond guy might have, but there was no way Chipmunk had. Shit. He wanted to stab something.

#

A version of him floating in the air. The Divine. Some creepy glowing eye guy. And the creepy glowing eye guy was ordering someone to 'slay the qunari'.

Cassandra immediately whirled. "You were there. Who attacked? And the Divine, is she..." It was clear the woman couldn't bring herself to say the word. She took a step towards him. "Was this vision true? What are we seeing?"

Damned if he knew. Last thing he could recall clearly was running into Chipmunk in the hallway. Fortunately, Solas seemed to know something about it. Fade bleeding or whatnot. He really just wanted a problem he could stab right now.

#

That... was a really big demon. Kathan drew both his knives and grinned. The thing did some kind of magic, pulling from the rift, and then their blades were just barely scratching it. That didn't seem fair at all. And worse, it was going to get people killed. A thought came to him, and he glanced down at the marked hand before using the energy to disrupt the rift. "Ha." It worked.

He brought his daggers back into the fray, flanking the beastie for Cassandra. He had to disrupt the rift a couple more times, and there



were some other demon-things. But it went down. Cassandra signaled him, and he turned towards the rift, letting the energy flow once more.

The last thing he saw before losing consciousness was the rift sealing.

#

He was waking up with a headache again. That was better than one alternative, at least. Maybe. He heard footsteps and looked up expecting to see Kas. An elven girl dropped the box she was holding and squealed.

"Why are you frightened?" He sat up in the bed. "What happened?" And where were his knives?

"That's wrong, isn't it? I said the wrong thing."

"I don't..." What was he wearing? Where was he supposed to keep knives in this thing? Were these supposed to be pajamas? Who'd dressed him? And what the hell were they smoking? "Think so." The girl fell to her knees and started rambling about forgiveness and blessing and a lot of other things that made no sense at all. He rose and offered her a hand back to her feet. She took it hesitantly, and kept talking. He was apparently back in Haven and the breach had stopped growing. "So you're saying..." He glanced down at the marked hand. "They're happy with me?"

"I'm only saying what I heard. I didn't mean anything by it." She backed away, nodding. "I'm certain Lady Cassandra would want to know you've awakened. She said, 'at once.'"

Maybe he'd get paid for this shit after all. "And where is she?"

"The Chantry. 'At once,' she said." The girl fled.

Kathan looked down at himself. He looked like a fool, and not in any kind of fun way. With a sigh, he went looking for his gear.

#

Crowds were gathering and starring and muttering and some of them were bowing and it was creeping him the fuck out. He headed for the Chantry just a bit shy of actively running.

#

"So I'm still a suspect, even after what we just did?" What the hell more did they want? Probably for him not to have horns. Or maybe some tap dancing. Juggling? He could keep four daggers in the air now.

"You absolutely are." The Chancellor Roderick guy started to take a step towards him. All Kathan had to do was straighten to his full height, and the guy couldn't get on the other side of the table fast enough.

"No, he is not." Cassandra glared at the chancellor. The red haired woman, Leliana, also came to his defense, though her method was to turn around and start accusing the chancellor. He had to make himself not laugh at the man's aghast expression upon finding himself a suspect.

And then they were looking at him again. And spouting something about the Maker and providence and... Oh shit, this was... "I'm not the only one that hit my head in that demon fight, am I?" Kas was going to kill him. Nobody got paid for holy shit.

The chancellor guy sputtered some more before rushing off, giving Kathan a wide berth. Kathan watched him go before turning back to the two women who had recently taken him prisoner. "When I woke up, I certainly didn't picture this outcome." The whole 'clasp him in chains and drag him off' thing had been a little bit closer, actually.

"Neither did we," Leliana said.

Cassandra held out a hand. "Help us fix this before it's too late."

Rule number two. Do the job, get paid, move on.

Rule number one. Don't get involved in the cause.

He met Cassandra's eyes. And then he took her hand.

## 2. Chapter 2

"The Chosen of Andraste, a blessed hero sent to save us all."

Kathan growled. "Half the folks here look at me like I should be riding a shining steed, and the other half look at me like I should be the shining steed."

Solas nodded. "I've journeyed deep into the Fade in ancient ruins and battlefields to see the dreams of lost civilizations. I've watched as hosts of spirits clashed to reenact the bloody past in ancient wars both famous and forgotten. Every great war has its heroes. I'm just curious what kind you'll be."

"Hopefully the kind who lives to become that embarrassing former hero everyone has to put up with." He looked out over the camp. A lot of people scurrying around. Now and then he spotted one that actually looked like they knew what they were doing.

"I can think of worse fates." Solas' mouth twitched just slightly in a smile.

"Yeah. Me too." Like when Kas learned he was alive and not being paid.

"I will stay, then. At least until the Breach has been closed."

"You mean not staying is an option?" Kathan threw up his hands. "Nobody told me." He tilted his head. "You're worried about the whole 'we're in a chantry and I'm an elf apostate thing?'"

"Cassandra has been accommodating, but you understand my caution."

"Ya helped, more 'in most can say. Ain't about to let you get dragged off."

"Thank you. I appreciate the thought. For now, let us hope either the mages or the templars have the power to seal the breach."

"So what did you mean with the whole 'journey to ancient ruins and battlefields' thing?" Kathan leaned on the building, folding his arms and watching the smaller man.

"Any building strong enough to withstand the rigors of time has a history. Every battlefield is steeped in death. Both attract spirits. They press against the veil, weakening the barrier between our worlds." He gestured, holding his hand out in front of him. "When I dream in such places, I go deep into the Fade. I can find memories no other living being has ever seen."

"That..." Kathan tilted his head to one side. "Is unbelievably awesome. You just take a nap and get history books acted out for you?"

"I suppose that is one way to put it, yes. It's not a common field of study, for obvious reasons. Not so flashy as throwing fire or lightning. The thrill of finding remnants of a thousand-year-old dream? I would not trade it for anything."

"So you know really do know your shit, yeah?"

Solas laughed. "Yes."

A runner headed in their direction. "My Lord Herald?"

Kathan pointed at Solas and started walking away, leaving behind a very confused runner and an amused elven apostate.

#

Varric saw a horned shadow and looked up. He tried not to smile. It seemed the Herald had found himself a far more Qunari style of armor, one that left most of his top half bare. More than a few of the women were staring, some with their mouths actually hanging open. A couple of the men were as well. "So, now that Cassandra's out of earshot, are you holding up alright? I mean, you go from being the most wanted criminal in Thedas to joining the armies of the faithful. Most people would have spread that out over more than one day."

Kathan rubbed one of his horns. Somewhere, he'd managed to find some metal coverings for them. The effect was rather impressive. "I have no idea what's happening anymore."

"That makes two of us." Varric gestured up at the sky. "For days now, we've been staring at the Breach, watching demons and Maker-knows-what fall out of it."

"Keep thinking any moment now I'm going to wake up and swear off Fereldan whiskey for the rest of my life."

"If this is all just the Maker winding us up, I hope there's a damn good punch line coming." Varric tilted his head. The guy was big, but he'd put money on him also being pretty young. Not much older than Hawke when they'd first met. If he was even that old. Maker, he was getting too old for this shit. "You might want to consider running at the first opportunity. I've written enough tragedies to recognize where this is going. Heroes are everywhere. I've seen that. But the hole in the sky? That's beyond heroes. We're going to need a miracle."

"Or a really fucking big trebuchet."

#

Cassandra tracked him down a few minutes later, and told him to come to the Chantry. He grumbled, but followed. His hand glowed briefly as they walked through the camp. Cassandra glanced at him. "Does it trouble you?"

It was very green. Maybe he'd see if Solas could make it turn other colors or something. He'd have preferred purple. Purple was more cheerful. "A bit annoying. I just wish I knew what it was. Or how I got it."

"We will find out." Her smile looked like it was trying to be reassuring. She led him into a room and began making introductions.

The guy from the mountain was Cullen, a pretty lady in yellow was Josephine. She gave him a slightly disbelieving look. "You're..." She tilted her head. "Even taller than I'd heard."

"And of course you know Sister Leliana." Cassandra gestured at the last woman, who was apparently the spymaster.

So what was he doing here? "That's an impressive bunch of titles." And for a group of people with an impressive bunch of titles, they clearly didn't know much more about what was going on than he did. The mark needed more power, something about templars and mages, and a lot of very unhappy priests.

"The Chantry has denounced the Inquisition - and you, specifically." Josephine waved her pen.

"Efficient of them." Kathan shrugged. And it wasn't particularly surprising.

"Shouldn't they be busy arguing over who's going to become Divine?" Cullen sounded annoyed.

Josephine sighed, then pointed her pen at Kathan. "Some are calling you - a Qunari - the 'Herald of Andraste.' That frightens the Chantry. The remaining clerics have declared it blasphemy, and we heretics for harboring you."

"Seriously?" He raised an eyebrow. "The 'Herald of Andraste'?"

"People saw what you did at the temple, how you stopped the Breach

from growing. They have also heard about the woman seen in the rift when we first found you. They believe that was Andraste." Cassandra punctuated her words with her hands as she explained.

"Even if we tried to stop that view from spreading -"

"Which we have not." Cassandra cut Leliana off.

Leliana continued anyway. "The point is, everyone is talking about you."

Which meant by now, Kas knew, and would be heading back from the Marches to kill him for still being alive. Cullen actually asked how he felt about the title. Kathan shook his head. "I'm no herald of anything, particularly not Andraste." He hadn't set foot in a Chantry since... actually, he hadn't set foot in a Chantry until the sky broke open.

"I'm sure the Chantry would agree." Cullen shrugged, apparently finding the situation amusing.

Kathan folded his arms. "So if I wasn't with the Inquisition..." Not that he would be for much longer, once Kas learned.

"Let's be honest: they would have censured us no matter what."

There was some more talking, and next he knew he was being sent to go talk to somebody's mother out in the Hinterlands. He was halfway down the mountain before he realized he still wasn't getting paid for this shit.

#

"Stop encouraging him."

"But Harding in..." Kathan glanced down at Cassandra and shrugged. "You're no fun."

She made a disgusted noise.

#

"And you must be the one they're calling the Herald of Andraste."

"Not through any choice of mine." Kathan watched the woman in Chantry robes watch him. He was being measured. He didn't like it.

"We seldom have much say in our fate, I'm sad to say." Mother Giselle appeared to come to a decision. She started talking about him going to Val Royeaux to meet with the Chantry's sewing circle clerical thing, and worse, it looked like she was going to be taking that suggestion to Leliana.

Didn't these people notice the horns? Maybe he'd paint them red. "That won't just make it worse?"

"Because you are Qunari?"

So she had noticed. "Some people find me frightening."

Mother Giselle smiled. "Let me put it this way: you needn't convince them all. You just need some of them to doubt. Their power is their unified voice. Take that from them, and you will receive the time you need."

Divide and conquer. Sensible tactic. "So I show up, say hello, show them the mark on my hand...?" Maybe a quick song and dance routine? He could juggle.

"I honestly don't know if you've been touched by fate or sent to help us..." Mother Giselle looked up at him. "But I hope."

He watched her walk away, and started looking around the area. A lot of refugees and desperate faces. Kathan rubbed the back of his neck and shrugged before heading down to see what he could do to help.

#

"That tower is impressive even as a ruin. I wonder what dreams it might hold?"

"Tell you what, Shiny. After we kill the demons, you can have a nap." Kathan sighed as his hand sparked in response to the presence of a nearby rift. He gestured, and the others immediately took up positions as the demons began to come through.

He sealed it, and then turned back to his companions. "What were we doing again?"

"Hunting rams and tracking down caches," Varric provided.

"Right." He waved casually up the hill. "Charge."

#

"I finally met someone who knew I wasn't the Herald of Andraste, and what did I do?"

"You convinced her you were the Herald of Andraste." Varric was clearly trying not to laugh.

"I convinced her I was the Herald of Andraste." Kathan threw his hands up in the air as he stalked across the plains, away from Speaker Anais and her group of loonies. "You could have stopped me, you know." He glared down at Varric.

"And miss the look on your face when you realized you'd just started your very own cult?" Varric shook his head. "Not a chance."

"Oh, look, giant hole in the air shitting out demons, let's all start worshipping it." Kathan shook his head. "Ooh, there's a big qunari with a glowing hand, now let's all worship him. Maybe Josephine can make some use of those maniacs. Hey, Shiny, you got the map we marked the caches on?"

"Yes."

"Lemme see it." He went to a rock and spread it out. "Okay, so, you'd

want your caches far enough to put some distance between you and any pursuers, but you'd want them close enough to get your wounded there before its too late. It's not quite a circle, but, well..."

Cassandra narrowed her eyes. "If that theory is correct, that would put the mage camp on the other side of the crossroads."

Kathan nodded, then looked over at Solas. "What do you think? If we get you close enough can you like sniff em out through the Veil wobbles or something?"

"Within a certain proximity I should be able to detect magical emanations."

"I don't suppose you've got a plan for locating the templar camp?" Varric asked.

"I was thinking of a big 'I'm a mage' sign and having Shiny make a glowing arrow in the sky."

"Right, because the most effective use of our fade expert is bait." Varric rolled his eyes.

"I was planning on using you, actually. They'd never see that coming."

#

"So these magical emanations, how are you sensing them anyway?"

Solas blinked as he looked up at Kathan. "What do you mean?"

"Seeing, smelling, tasting, what?"

"Use of magic affects the Veil. Perhaps an analogy might be standing in a body of water and feeling the ripples."

"And that's what it's like for you all the time?"

"More or less."

"So spells are like, what, splashing the water at people?"

"If we continue the analogy, I suppose you could put it that way."

"Huh. That..." He tilted his head. "Yeah, I can get my mind around that. Thanks, Shiny."

#

He whipped a dagger into the face of the guy running at Solas' back, then drew another before leaping in to aid Cassandra. A warrior with a tower shield was facing the Seeker, and Kathan moved in to flank. When the man turned to face the new threat, Cassandra ran him through. They continued up the hill. Rather than face the two warriors forming a shield wall, Kathan bounded up the nearby rocks

and jumped over the palisade, landing behind them. One turned, and was flattened by the charging Cassandra. The other fell to his knives.

Solas arced lightning ahead as Kathan and Cassandra continued their push up the hill, lighting up the enemy templars. A crossbow bolt grew out of the archer's chest, and Kathan sent a knife into the knee of the guy charging at Cassandra. The last guy had a shield, and attempted to hit Cassandra with it. Cassandra stepped back, forcing the man to overreach, and Kathan was there, driving both his daggers into the opening the Seeker had provided.

"Let's go tell Corporal Vale the good news," Varric said, collecting his crossbow bolts.

"And we should be getting back to Skyhold." Cassandra wiped her blade clean.

"Well, this was fun. We should do it again sometime." Kathan added two new daggers to his growing collection.

#

Josephine held up a hand as the Herald passed. He altered his direction to approach her. "I have received a response to the message you asked be sent." She offered him the sealed parchment.

He grinned widely as he took it from her. "Thanks, Ruffles. Appreciate it."

"It was my pleasure." She went to her desk as he opened the parchment. His smile faded almost immediately. A moment later he crumpled the parchment in his hand and flung it into the brazier before walking out of her office. She blinked. Her latest appointment was on his way but... Her eyes fell on the man leaving the war room. "Commander Cullen?"

"Yes?"

"Would you be so kind as to locate the Herald? I believe he may have just received bad news and..."

Cullen nodded.

#

It took him over an hour before he found the Herald down by one of the trebuchets, assisting the engineers with the construction. Cullen raised an eyebrow as he saw the young man pick up a load that would have taken at least two of the other soldiers to carry, and handle it easily. He approached.

One of the engineers saw him and looked up. "Commander."

"Work has progressed, I see." He looked at the trebuchet, then back at the engineer. "You're altering the design."

"I... er..." The engineer looked towards the Herald.

"You're using Braddic's." The Herald set the load he was carrying



down. "Eton is mostly the same design, cept you get five shots to every four on Braddic's."

"Yes, but you lose distance." Cullen folded his arms.

"Not if you go back to Vakarian's design on the spring. See?" The big man pointed at a sketch that was hanging on one side of the contraption. "And it's easier to calibrate."

Cullen played out the motion in his head, and then nodded. "I'm going to want to see a test run before I approve this change for the others." He raised an eyebrow. "You know siege engines."

"First merc group we ran with had this dwarf. He used to shut me up by giving me a sketch and tools and having me build models of his designs." Kathan shrugged. "Ya ain't mad?"

"No, but I would appreciate being consulted before you make any other changes to my equipment."

"You're the boss." Kathan started to go back for another load of wood.

Cullen followed. "Josephine asked me to find you. She was concerned."

Kathan stopped at the wood pile. He exhaled. "Kas didn't make it."

"Kas?"

"Boss. Sister. All the family I had. She..." He swallowed. "She went back up to the Temple looking for me and..." He trailed off.

"She was in the Temple when the explosion hit. I'm sorry, Kathan."

"Yeah. Been waiting since I woke up to see her walking in to yell at me for getting involved in all this. Rule one, never get involved in the cause. And I'm not even getting paid for this, so she'd..." He shook his head. "She'd..."

"Are you..." Cullen shifted his weight awkwardly, unsure about how to offer comfort to a grieving young Qunari.

"I figured she was..." He rubbed at one of his horns. "When she hadn't shown up yet. She'd never have left Haven until she knew for sure. But I hoped." He sighed. "Thought about sparins, figured I'd better take some out on the trees first. Then your trebuchet was all wrong so I thought about that for a while instead."

He hesitated. Perhaps the younger man could use the distraction. "It occurs to me we may someday need a more mobile version."

"Some castle you've a mind to take?" Kathan raised an eyebrow.

"I'd like to have an option, if we discover the one responsible for the conclave holed up behind walls."

"Yeah. You read Victus's shit on dealing with the mountain problem?"

He might be a Vint, but he had some decent ideas on counterweights so you could work with a smaller base."

Cullen smiled. "Show me."

#

"You're kind of a force of nature, aren't you?"

Cassandra looked up to see the Herald watching her. "When I need to be." She reset for another series of attacks on the practice dummy.

"It's impressive."

She hit the dummy again. "You flatter me."

"I'm trying."

The next blow was overswung. She grunted. Rather than continue, she tossed the blade aside. "Did I do the right thing?" It felt odd, giving voice to her doubts. Odder still to be voicing them to the man that caused many of them. "What I have set in motion here could destroy everything I have revered my whole life. One day, they may write about me as a traitor, a madwoman, a fool." She looked over the rack of swords. "And they may be right."

"You believe, right? In the Chantry and the whole faith thing. What's it saying?" He folded his arms and leaned on one of the practice dummies as he watched her.

"I believe you are innocent." The faith thing. She grabbed a heavier sword. "I believe more is going on here than we can see." She focused, switching her style from Nevarran to her Orlesian training. "And I believe no one else cares to do anything about it. They will stand in the fire and complain that it is hot." She stopped a moment. "But is this the Maker's will?" She tossed the sword aside, and selected a different blade. "I can only guess."

"You don't think I'm the Herald of Andraste?"

Damn the man. Did he have to sound so hopeful about the notion? "I think you were sent to help us. I hope you were. But the Maker's help takes many forms. Sometimes it is difficult to discern who it truly benefits, or how."

"So where do we go from here?" He picked up the discarded swords and replaced them on the rack.

"Now we deal with the Chantry's panic over you before they do even more harm." She gave her current blade a few test swings, then selected a different one. "Then we close the Breach. We are the only ones who can. After that, we find out who is responsible for this chaos, and we end them." She hit the dummy with an overhand blow. This blade was better. "And if there are consequences to be paid for what I have done, I pay them. I only pray the price is not too high."

"Ain't it a bit late to worry about it now?"

"We have only just begun." She blinked as he handed her the sheath for the sword. "My trainers always said, 'Cassandra you are too brash. You must think before you act.' I see what must be done, and I do it. I see no point in running around in circles like a dog chasing its tail. But I misjudged you in the beginning, did I not? I thought the answer was before me, clear as day. I cannot afford to be so careless again."

"Can't say I'm not grateful to hear that." He actually smiled.

"I can be harsh, I know." She'd threatened his life rather thoroughly, and he'd agreed to help anyway. Not only agreed to help, but done a fair job of restoring order to the Hinterlands in only a few days. She buckled the new scabbard on, tested its position on her hip. Good enough. She placed the sword inside. She started to head back towards the Chantry, then turned back towards him. "You've said you don't believe you're chosen. Does that mean..." She hesitated, then asked. "You also don't believe in the Maker?"

He shrugged. "Never really given it much thought."

That really wasn't an answer. For a moment, she wondered what would have happened if he'd said he didn't. Or if he'd said he did. "I must believe, even if you do not. Surely the Maker put us both on this path for a reason."

#

Oh, look. A riot. Kathan watched Cullen break it up. If the Inquisition's mages and templars couldn't work together, how the hell were they supposed to get the rest of them to play? His eyes narrowed when he saw Chancellor Roderick start in. At least Cullen wasn't putting up with the guy's bullshit. He took a breath, and waded in.

Cullen nodded when he saw Kathan, and gestured at the disappearing backs of the rioters. "Mages and templars were already at war. Now they're blaming each other for the Divine's death."

"Which is why we require a proper authority to guide them back to order." Roderick seemed to think he should be heard.

"Who, you?" Cullen actually smirked. "Random clerics who weren't important enough to be at the Conclave?"

"The rebel Inquisition and its so-called 'Herald of Andraste?'" Roderick glared. "I think not."

"I'm not the Herald." Kathan muttered.

"That laudable humility won't stop the Inquisition from using the misconception when it suits them." Roderick gestured angrily.

"The Inquisition claims only that we must close the Breach or perish." Cullen didn't budge an inch.

"You say that now, Commander. We shall see if the sentiment remains true."

Kathan rubbed one of his horns. "The Inquisition functions as well as

any young family." There was even marginally less yelling.

Roderick started to wag a finger, and then looked up at him and apparently reconsidered. "How many families are on the verge of splitting into open warfare with themselves?"

Cullen rolled his eyes. "Yes, because that would never happen to the Chantry."

He clapped the man on the shoulder before heading into the Chantry. "Send a bird if they light the place on fire. We'll bring back marshmallows."

"What is a marshmallow?" Cullen blinked.

"They are these soft chewy little melty white things that..." Kathan trailed off at the blank look on Cullen's face. "Nevermind."

#

"You want me to walk into a pit of vipers? Can't I go fight some more demons instead?"

Josephine shook her head. "They're not vipers just because they like to hiss."

It appeared he was off to Val Royeaux. Cassandra was coming with him. He imagined Varric would probably be coming along as well. And he still wasn't getting paid for this shit.

#

"What is the Fade, anyway?"

"The Fade is the world of dreams." Solas turned his head to look up at the man who'd fallen into step beside him. Kathan had protested riding in the carriage, pointing out they really didn't have one big enough. Solas found himself grateful. He hadn't been looking forward to being cooped up for the journey.

"That sounds like way too simple an answer." Kathan glanced down at him.

"It is, however, the complex one would take several days." Assuming the young man could understand it at all.

"And what all do you know about it?"

"A great deal, from my wanderings. There are few hard facts, but I can share what I have learned." He was somewhat surprised a qunari man would be interested. If nothing else, the conversation would pass the time.

"Okay, so..." Kathan turned and began walked backwards for a few steps so he could point at the Breach. "What is that thing?"

"Simply put, it is a tear in the Veil between this world and the Fade, allowing spirits to enter the world physically. Small tears occur naturally when magic weakens the veil or when spirits cluster at an area that has seen many deaths. But your mark allows you to

exert some control over the Breach. That means it was created deliberately." And the danger this young man faced because of it was far from over.

"And this Veil thingy is what?"

"Circle mages call it a barrier between this world and the Fade. But according to my studies in ancient elven lore, that is a vast oversimplification. Without it..." Solas gestured as he spoke. "Imagine if spirits entered freely, if the Fade was not a place one went but a state of nature like the wind."

Kathan tilted his head to one side. "Sounds like it could be, I dunno. Fun, interesting, and scary. Probably pretty too."

"Yes. A world where imagination defines reality, where spirits are as common as trees or grass. Instead, spirits are strange and fearful, and the Fade is a terrifying world touched only by mages and dreamers." He gave the man a surprised look. The last two people he'd made the suggestion to had all but recoiled in terror at the notion. "I am glad I am not alone in seeing the beauty of such a world, along with the obvious peril."

"And the demons?"

"The Circle says that demons hate the natural world and seek to bring their chaos and destruction to the living." He realized just how much the other man was shortening his stride, and lengthened his own to close the difference. "But such simplistic labels misconstrue their motivations and, in so doing, do all a great disservice. Spirits wish to join the living, and a demon is that wish gone wrong."

"So is there a good way to deal with the ones coming out of the rift? I mean, if we don't have to stab them, that would be better, right?" Kathan shrugged. "A diplomatic solution, maybe?"

Solas almost stumbled. He hadn't expected that question from those he'd aligned himself with in this matter. Certainly not from a qunari. "Not in the world we know today. The Veil creates a barrier that makes such true understanding most unlikely." He found himself giving the young man another look. "But the question is a good one, and it matters that you thought to ask." He hesitated a moment. "Closing the Breach is our primary goal, but I hope we might also discover what was used to create it. Any artifact of such power is dangerous. The destruction of the Conclave proves that much."

"You don't think it got blown up with the temple?"

"You survived, did you not?" Solas glanced at the man's hand. "The artifact that created the Breach is unlike anything seen in this age. I will not believe it destroyed until I see the shattered fragments with my own eyes."

"Yeah, that doesn't seem like the kind of thing we should let lie around."

"Leliana's people have scoured the area near the blast and found nothing. Whatever the artifact was, it is no longer there."

"How come you don't wear shoes?"

Solas blinked at the abrupt subject change. "I prefer not to."

"Don't your feet get cold?"

"Why do you not wear a shirt?"

"Findin one that fits right is a pain in the ass, so I got used to not wearing them. Now they just annoy me." He tilted his head. "Point took, but if you step on a sharp rock I ain't carrying you."

#

"My lord Herald."

He started to deny it, but Cassandra stepped on the back of his foot and he shut up. Leliana's spy filled her in on the situation. The templars had also gathered, and it seemed people believed the templars had returned to protect them from the Inquisition. "They wish to protect the people? From us?"

"Protect them from the big scary blasphemous horned guy, I'd say." Kathan waved a hand casually.

"Surely they cannot think such a thing." She glanced up at him, and then nearly sighed in vexation. He had to arrive in Val Royeaux dressed like a barbarian, didn't he? Surely he could have at least found a shirt somewhere instead of that leather vest and rope thing.

"Why not?" Kathan chuckled. "They sure ain't the only ones."

"You think the Order's returned to the fold, maybe? To deal with us upstarts?" Varric ran a hand over Bianca's grip.

"I know Lord Seeker Lucius. I can't imagine him coming the Chantry's defense, not after all that's occurred."

"So, we've got trouble then?" Maker's breath, did the man have to sound so amused by the situation?

"Perhaps." Cassandra sent the scout back to Haven.

#

The mom was grandstanding. He was apparently a wicked Qunari bent on the subversion of the Maker's word by claiming to be the Herald of Andraste. "I make no such claim. I wasn't sent here by Andraste or the Maker." He saw Cassandra grit her teeth. "I am simply trying to close the Breach. It threatens us all."

Cassandra stepped forward before he could keep talking. "It's true. The Inquisition seeks only to end this madness before it is too late."

Oh. Look. Templars. He was mentally planning on how to extract them from incipient violence when one of the templars punched the mom in the head, sending her to the ground. Then he started planning how to make with the incipient violence. "Was that display supposed to

impress me?"

"On the contrary. It wasn't for you at all." The old guy tried to stare down at him, but the platform he was standing on did little more than put him at equal height to Kathan.

Next to him, Cassandra tried diplomacy. It didn't work, but it didn't seem to actively make the situation worse. The old guy, Lord Seeker Lucius, gave an overwrought speech. He'd seen better from Antivan puppeteers. Something was slightly off about that guy. The templars stalked off through the square, but it seemed not all of them were happy about it.

"Has Lord Seeker Lucius gone mad?" Cassandra watched him go.

Kathan shrugged. "Well, so much for having a lot of armored guys to hide behind."

Cassandra shook her head. "I wouldn't write them off so quickly. There must be those in the Order who see what he's become."

"Plenty of them. Don't mean they'll walk. Seen a lot of mercs die following orders they knew were stupid, and that was without mixing belief into it." Kathan turned to check on the injured lady.

She looked up at him. "Just tell me one thing: if you do not believe you are the Maker's chosen, then what are you?"

He helped her get back to her feet and draped her over one of her assistants. "A guy trying to help."

"That is..." She tilted her head at him. "More comforting than you might imagine."

#

Somebody shot an arrow at Cassandra's feet. With a message tied to it that sent them looking for handkerchiefs. Then, they got invited to a party. And then an elf stepped into their path, blocking their forward motion. Cassandra identified her as a Grand Enchanter Fiona.

"If it's help with the Breach you seek, perhaps my people are the wiser option." Fiona looked up at him.

He asked her why she wasn't at the Conclave, and she pointed out Lucius hadn't been either. She then squarely put the blame for what happened at the feet of the templars. She invited them to Redcliffe, and then walked away. Cassandra looked frustrated, but let her leave. Kathan shrugged. "Alright, let's go to the party. And it looks like we've got the location of a good back alley to puke in after."

Cassandra made a disgusted sound.

#

"This is your manservant?" The man at the door somehow managed to look down his nose at Kathan despite Kathan being over a foot taller than he was.

"No, this is my dad." Kathan smiled politely at the butler. Solas gave him a disbelieving look.

"I..." The butler blinked and looked from Kathan to Solas and back again. "What?"

"We were invited by a First Enchanter Vivienne." Kathan held up the piece of parchment then offered it to the man.

"Yes, well, your..." The butler narrowed his eyes and looked him over with considerable disapproval. "Father and companions are going to have to wait outside."

#

The horny lady wanted to join up. Why were they asking him? Though the way she'd sent that Marquis off with his tail between his legs had been pretty funny. And she had some rank, clearly. Josephine'd probably be mad if he said no.

#

"They've got no breeches," Sera announced.

He blinked, and then started to grin as the half-naked guards came rushing out after them. "Hey, if any live, we should give them tattoos!"

"Butts, butts, butts!"

#

After the frustrations of Val Royeaux, stretching her legs made her feel better. She caught up with Kathan. "It occurs to me I don't actually know much about you."

He shrugged. "What do you want to know?"

"Where are you from?"

"Free Marches, mostly. Did some work in Antiva. Born in Antiva, actually. I think." Or had it been Rivain?

"Tell me, do you consider the Free Marches your home? Are you eager to go back?"

Kathan shrugged. "Home is wherever I am, really." He couldn't remember the last time he'd woken up to the same roof more than a couple weeks in a row.

Cassandra found herself smiling. "I feel that way too, after years of tending to business for the Divine."

"So tell me 'bout you?" He shrugged, then looked down at her. "What's the tale of Cassandra?"

"There's..." She shrugged. "Not much to know."

He actually laughed at her. She briefly considered stabbing him.



"You're being modest?"

"Do you think me a braggart?" She folded her arms and glared.

"No." He smiled. "I think you're interesting."

When they got back she was going to find him some shirts. Talking to him when he was wearing little more than rope on his top half was very distracting. "As you wish." She sighed, and launched into her background. He asked a few questions, and revealed that he didn't actually know the story of how she'd become Right Hand. Then he pestered her about what her job for Justinia actually was. Just when she thought he'd forgotten, he asked her how she'd become the Right Hand. And wasn't satisfied with the short version. Reluctantly, she told him the story of the battle at the Grand Cathedral.

"You're delightful, you know that?" He grinned down at her again.

"No, I do not know that."

"Mm-hmmm..." He smirked.

"I object." She considered driving her elbow into his unarmored torso. "There is nothing 'delightful' about me."

"I beg to differ."

It was like driving her elbow into a tree trunk. He barely even grunted. "I think I preferred you in the stocks."

#

"Complaining at each other isn't going to get us to a solution any faster." Kathan wanted to growl at them. Humans always got jumpy when you growled at them.

"I agree." Cassandra stepped up beside him.

That didn't entirely stop the bickering, but it did take on a more reasonable tone. Cassandra pointed out that approaching the mages was likely to be dangerous. He raised an eyebrow at her. "I've been in danger since I walked out of the Fade." He batted the hilt of her sword lightly, and she glared at him.

Cullen, Cassandra, and Josephine started heading back to the war room, but Leliana approached him. It seemed in addition to issues with the mages and templars, Wardens were up to something. Bah, any minute now a Qunari was going to show up and ask to join.

#

He walked out of the Chantry to find guy representing a Qunari that wished to join.

#

As soon as he let the little girl take him down, the other kids piled on him, laughing and giggling. "Hold him!" Sera yelled before dumping a bucket of snow on his head.

"Hey, that's cheating!" Kathan managed to stand despite several children hanging onto various limbs. "I've got a gold piece for whoever sticks snow down her pants."

Sera cackled and rushed off, followed by a half dozen laughing kids flinging snowballs at her. He brushed himself off, then turned to see Mother Giselle watching him. "Uh..."

"Greetings, Herald of Andraste. How fares your quest to seal the Breach?" Her lips twitched as she tried to hide a smile.

"Well, you know how these things go." He shrugged. "At least, I hope someone does."

She gave him an approving nod. "You laugh to bring a little light into the darkness. I am glad to see it. Too many see laughter as antithetical to the Chant of Light. They imagine Andraste as a grim warrior all her life, forgetting that she loved and was loved in return. I hope she found time for laughter during her trials. As I hope you do."

"Some of those kids lost parents up at that temple." Kathan shrugged, and tried not to think about Kas. "So Sera and I are playing the bad influences."

Mother Giselle actually laughed. "I wholeheartedly disagree with that assessment." She was about to say something else when a five-year-old ran up to him triumphantly demanding her gold piece, followed by Sera and a group of kids carrying snowballs. He tossed the coin to the kid and ran for it.

#

A man in the Crossroads was able to direct him to where they could find Blackwall. Seemed the Warden took bandit activity rather personal. A bit too personal. There was a note on one of the bandits. Kathan pocketed it smoothly while the attention of the others was occupied elsewhere, and then turned his attention back to the Warden. The Warden looked him over. "You're no farmer. Why do you know my name? Who are you?"

"I've been called a lot of things lately by a lot of people." Though these days they were mostly calling him nicer things.

The guy in the Warden armor folded his arms. "Well, I'm talking to you. Stop dancing."

Cassandra put a hand on his arm, stopping him from responding. "We're Inquisition, trying to find out why the Wardens disappeared and if it had anything to do with the Divine's murder."

Kathan watched the guy object to the insinuations. There was something just slightly off. He'd talked to a few Wardens before. Most of them didn't give a shit about anything but darkspawn. Took all kinds, he supposed. He threw out a few questions, but the answers told him little. "Well, this was helpful. Ish. Best of luck to you." He turned to start heading back to the crossroads.

"Inquisition... Agent, did you say? Hold a moment." Blackwall called

to him. "The Divine is dead, and the sky is torn. Events like these, thinking we're absent is almost as bad as thinking we're involved. If you're trying to put things right, maybe you need a Warden. Maybe you need me."

He stood a moment before turning back around. "Welcome to the party. Drinks are on Cassandra."

She made that noise again. He smiled.

#

Harding let him know that bandits had fucked with some of the Inquisition's soldiers. Not behavior he was inclined to tolerate.

#

The gunari with the big axe took one look at him and started laughing. "Hot damn, it's true. Oh, the Chantry must love you. A gunari mercenary is the Herald of Andraste. Who'da thought?"

"I'm not the..." He rolled his eyes. "You're doing well enough."

"I get by." The other gunari tossed off some more orders to his soldiers, then gestured for Kathan to follow him to the side. "We're expensive, but we're worth it..." He gestured lazily at the carnage on the beach. "And I'm sure the Inquisition can afford us."

He'd heard of the Chargers. Something about a giant. And Kas ranting because they'd gotten a job she'd wanted. "Your crew looks useful." He tilted his head. They also could generally name their own price, so why were they eager for this gig? Unless... ah. Probably not a surprise.

"They are. But you're not just getting the boys. You're getting me." Iron Bull stood. "You need a frontline bodyguard, I'm your man. Whatever it is - demons, dragons? The bigger the better." Iron Bull stood at the same height, but was somewhat wider. Not a man he'd want to go toe to toe with. "And there's one more thing."

Well now, the man was actually going to come clean. Interesting. "I suppose there is." Kathan nodded to him. "What interest does the Ben-Hassrath have?"

Iron Bull's mouth dropped open for a second before recovered and shrugged. "The Ben-Hassrath are concerned about the Breach. Magic out of control like that could cause trouble everywhere. I've been ordered to join the Inquisition, get close to the people in charge, and send reports on what's happening. But I also get reports from Ben-Hassrath agents all over Orlais. You sign me on, I'll share them with your people."

If he didn't agree, they'd just try again. And they probably already had, but this guy had the feel of someone higher up in the ranks. If one was going to play a game, it would be helpful to know what pieces were on the board. "You don't send anything without Leliana's say-so. We get a hint you are screwing with us, Cassandra here is going to stab you with your own horns."

"Wouldn't have it any other way." Iron Bull gave him a thoughtful look before turning to give orders to his crew.

#

They found where the soldiers had been ambushed and killed. Someone had left a note talking about some kind of way to take over the bandit group. A couple hours later, Kathan was stalking back to camp grumbling again. "Shut up, Varric."

"Seriously, how many cults do you have dedicated to you, now?"

"Shut up, Varric."

"You've got the one in the Crossroads."

"Shut up, Varric."

"These Blades of Hessarian."

"Shut up, Varric."

"That gaggle of Chantry sisters that swoon every time you walk by."

"Shut up, Varric."

"All the soldiers who were at the Breach."

"Shut up, Varric."

"That one noblewoman and her entire entourage of ladies in waiting. Though that one's just dedicated to your shoulders."

"Shut up, Varric."

#

"I have to admit, I thought you'd be..."

"Taller?" Kathan grinned.

"Er..." Blackwall shifted his weight awkwardly.

"Upfront is better than 'oxman'."

Blackwall shrugged. "It was a foolish thought. Should've known better than to say anything. It's what you do, and how you do it, that's important." He looked Kathan over. "Just one question, then. How do you think you fit in with all this?"

Good question. Where did he fit in with all this? "I'm just trying to help things get unfucked."

Laughter tinged the other man's words. "A worthy goal." He shrugged. "For me, I'll be satisfied so long as we find the bastards that killed the Divine."

Kathan leaned on the wall. "So, tell me about the Wardens..."

#

"I met an elven mage earlier. Solas, I believe he was called." Vivienne gave him a weighing and measuring look that reminded him uncomfortably of Kas when she was trying to find something to yell at him about. "I admit, I was surprised. I didn't expect to find mages among the Inquisition. Tell me: why were you at the Divine Conclave."

"This war isn't good for anybody, even the folks getting paid to fight. If the Conclave could get things settled, well, we were glad to take the job."

"If only the rebels saw things so clearly." She smoothed her garment. "Justinia's death has shattered the balance of power in Thedas. If it is not restored quickly, countless lives will be lost. Mages, templars, innocent people of all kinds now look to the Inquisition to decide their fate."

"So here you are, offering to help with the deciding." He tilted his head as he looked down at her. A cat who thought she'd found a way into the creamery.

Vivienne gave him a polite smile. "Wouldn't you? For almost a thousand years, the world believed it was in the hands of the Maker. And now many believe that you are the agent of his will. Whatever the truth is, that belief gives you power."

"Isn't that what the priests should be for?" He shrugged. "Assuming they get their acts together."

"That's reassuring to hear." Vivienne gave him another appraising look. "I've stolen enough of your time, my dear. Don't let me keep you."

#

"Has anyone dared ask? No, I do not think -" Josephine waved for him to enter her office. "Ah, Master Adaar. May I have a word?"

He ducked under the door frame and entered her office. "What do you need?"

"Well, as you are Tal-Vashoth, people have asked..." Josephine moved some papers around. "You grew up outside the Qunari homeland, but..." She stacked the papers back up and sighed. "There is no easy way to ask your thoughts on the Qun."

Kas had talked of the Qun. There had been a time she'd talked of giving up the merc life and joining, until she'd learned they'd likely be separated if she did. He missed her. "Have you studied the Qun?"

"It is a decided gap in my education." She gestured. "I know the Qun is a philosophy, a set of laws, a legislative guide, and a social architecture governing the Qunari. Those who appeared at court, however, insisted the Qun is too complex for an outsider."

Kathan shook his head. The couple times he'd been interested enough to ask, he'd gotten the same answer. Well, the couple times he'd

gotten an answer instead of a simple 'leave or die, tal'vashoth'.  
"Well, it ain't cause you're human. 'Real' Qunari tell me I'll never understand the Qun."

"Yet they take converts. Their criteria is beyond my grasp. Do you believe in any of the Qun's philosophies?"

He actually laughed. "You can't take a shit in the Qun without someone deciding what color it should be. That's not a life for me."

"Many won't accept your word, by virtue of your birth. People ask how a Qunari could be Andraste's Herald. It worries them if they believe it, and angers them if they do not. Convincing them of your good intentions will be tasking."

It was just a thought, but they could also stop calling him the Herald of Andraste. That might help. "Maybe they'll go easier on me they knew of my winsome smile." He smiled as ridiculously wide as he could, showing all his teeth.

Josephine gave him a look that conveyed both amusement and annoyance. "I'll be sure to add a postscript to my letters. Strangely, your mercenary work is not so inflammatory. People are fabricating extravagant tales of your heroics."

"They don't know how we held Kelgor's Pass, or tricked an army into surrendering at Val Falaise. These people don't know the half of what we've done." Kas's face flashed in his mind.

"I noticed. Leliana found a letter from the captain of your last company. He had nothing but praise for your skill in battle, but doesn't mention what part you played."

He blinked. "Captain Tully praised me? William 'Iron-Ass' Tully?"

"That's quite the moniker." Josephine laid her hand on the stack of parchment next to her. "But yes. Your captain went so far as to say he'd have lost entire battles without you."

No kidding. It's like the man was an ambush magnet. "That miser deducted five gold from my pay the day we left."

"Whatever for?" Josephine glanced up at him.

"Poor morale." Which might have something to do with giving him the moniker of 'Iron-Ass'. Or maybe the part where he'd etched said moniker into the guy's breast plate.

"Well, your captain still held your skills in high regard. Especially after your last engagement."

"I was in charge of mercenaries storming the headquarters of the bandits we were to dispatch." He'd argued with Kas's plan, and ultimately disobeyed her orders. "We caught them by surprise. It was over before the sentries even blew their horns." She'd wanted to go in the front gates. He'd gone up a water course instead. No fatalities on his team. She'd yelled at him for a week.

"That is impressive. I hope life in Haven doesn't bore you, compared to such exploits."

"The giant pulsing tear in the sky does keep things lively." He shrugged. "So do the arguments in the war room." How three people consistently managed to remain evenly divided boggled him.

"Ah. Our voices carry that far, do they?" Josephine sighed. "I must bring that up at the next meeting..."

#

Cullen blinked as a bag of something landed on his desk. He looked up to see Kathan, then glanced at the bag. The contents appeared to be small white items. "And these are?"

"Marshmallows." Kathan shrugged cheerfully before wandering off again.

He picked one up, turned it over a couple times, then tried it.

### 3. Chapter 3

"Herald."

"Never heard of him."

Cullen folded his arms. "Where are you going with a half dozen shields?"

"Oh. The round ones make better sleds."

"I..." Cullen shook his head. "I'm going to go over there and pretend we never had this conversation."

#

"Wait, what?" Kathan straightened up from where he had been watching quietly.

Leliana shook her head. "He betrayed us. He murdered my agent."

"I ain't sayin he ain't an ass, but..." Kathan waved a hand. "You'd just up and murder him?"

"You find fault with my decision?" She narrowed her eyes.

"Yeah." He met her eyes. "I do. Ya ain't thinkin it clear. Folks don't up and betray without a reason, and it's clear this guy got in deep. Ya kill him, that's a lot of questions going unanswered and..." He took a deep breath. "And we're the good guys."

"You feel very strongly about this." Leliana nodded. Then she turned to her agent. "Apprehend Butler, but see that he lives." She looked back at him. "Now, if you're happy, I have work to do."

#

"You are concerned regarding Redcliffe?"

"It's just..." Kathan shrugged. "That's a lot of mages."

"I see."

"Hey, don't be like that Shiny. It's just other than you I've only ever really talked to one other mage and she was also an apostate who had to keep her magic all quiet like. So she wouldn't answer any questions about it ever." Kathan shrugged. "Kas didn't care for mages cause of..." The vague memory of his home on fire flashed in his mind. "Well, don't matter now. So the only really magicky mages I encountered were those among enemy forces doing bad shit and trying to set me on fire. And Silky straight up froze a guy, then asked if I wanted her to kill him."

"That may, perhaps, have more to do with Orlesian politics than magic."

"Yeah, probably. I don't think I have a problem with mages so much as I have a problem with being on fire, and the chances of me being on fire increase a bit with mages around." Kathan shrugged. "We know where the templars are standing. Least we can do is hear the mages out. But if the magic starts flying, I'm hiding behind you."

"You may wish to consider a larger shield."

"You calling me fat?" Kathan grinned. "So, tell me more of Solas."

"Why?"

"You've got more to lose than I do, but you're actually here willingly." And he was pretty sure Solas wasn't getting paid either.

"Not the wisest course of action when framed that way."

"You seem good people. Just wanted to know more about you." The guy really was an odd duck. He didn't even really look quite like the other elves Kathan had known. For one thing, he was almost freakishly tall for an elf.

"I am sorry. With so much fear in the air..." Solas clasped his hands behind his back. "What would you know of me?"

"So..." Might as well start with the thing that seemed to make him the duckiest of odds. "Why'd you start studying the Fade?"

"I grew up in a village to the north. There was little to interest a young man, especially one gifted with magic. But as I slept, spirits of the Fade showed me glimpses of wonders I had never imagined. I treasured my dreams. Being awake, out of the Fade, became troublesome."

"Don't spirits or demons or whatever try to tempt you? That's what the stories say they do, anyway." At least in the stories Kas hadn't gotten mad at the other mercs for telling him as a kid.

"No more than a brightly colored fruit is deliberately tempting you to eat it." He shrugged. "I learned how to defend myself from more



aggressive spirits and how to interact safely with the rest. I learned how to control my dreams with full consciousness. There was so much I wanted to explore."

"But you had to wake up sometime, right?"

"Eventually I was unable to find new areas in the Fade."

"Why?"

"Two reasons. First, the Fade reflects the world around it. Unless I traveled, I would never find anything new. Second, the Fade reflects and is limited by our imaginations. To find interesting areas, one must be interesting."

"That why you're here, inquisitioning?"

"I joined the Inquisition because we are all in terrible danger." He smiled. "If our enemies destroyed the world, I would have nowhere to lay my head while dreaming of the Fade."

Kathan shrugged. "Not the worst reason I've heard to go out and enjoy life."

"I am glad to hear it. In truth, I have enjoyed experiencing more of life to find more of the Fade."

"Well, yeah. That's called living, ain't it?"

"You train to flick a dagger or an arrow to its target. The grace with which you move is a pleasing side benefit. You have chosen a path whose steps you do not dislike because it leads to a destination you enjoy. As have I."

"You've been around a lot of places, you said?"

"This world, or its memory, is reflected in the Fade. Dream in ancient ruins, and you may see a city lost to history. Some of my fondest memories were found in crumbling cities long picked dry by treasure seekers." He gestured. "The best are the battlefields. Spirits press so tightly on the Veil that you can slip across with but a thought."

So not just the boring dry histories playing out for him. "Any good ones?"

"I dreamt at Ostagar. I witnessed the brutality of the darkspawn and the valor of the Ferelden warriors. I saw Alistair and the Hero of Ferelden light the signal fire..." Solas lifted his shoulders. "And Loghain's infamous betrayal of Cailan's forces."

"Really? What really happened? Cause you hear a lot of different stories."

"That's just it. In the Fade, I see reflections created by spirits who react to the emotions of the warriors. One moment, I see heroic Wardens lighting the fire and a power-mad villain sneering as he lets King Cailan fall. The next, I see an army overwhelmed and a veteran commander refusing to let more soldiers die in a lost cause."

"But which one is real?" Kathan rubbed one of his horns.

"It is the Fade. They are all real."

That almost seemed to make sense. A bit. He shrugged. "And you do all this wandering about by yourself?"

"Not at all. I have built many lasting friendships. Spirits of wisdom, possessed of ancient knowledge, happy to share what they had seen. Spirits of purpose helped me search. Even wisps, curious and playful, would point out treasures I might have missed."

"Don't think I know those types of spirits." Granted, he didn't know much about spirits at all, when it came right down to it.

"They rarely seek this world. When they do, their natures do not often survive exposure to the people they encounter. Wisdom and purpose are too easily twisted to pride and desire."

"Wait..." Kathan turned back to look at where the Breach hung in the sky. "We fought a pride demon, back at the breach rift thing. You saying you are friends with those?"

"They were not demons for me."

He rubbed one of his horns. "Not getting it."

"The Fade reflects the minds of the living. If you expect a spirit of wisdom to be a pride demon, it will adapt. And if your mind is free of corrupting influences? If you understand the nature of the spirit? They can be fast friends."

"You believe they are one thing..." He tilted his head, trying to understand. "So they are that thing?" Kathan frowned. "I think I get it. That's neat. You trust these spirits not to possess you if you say 'I wish' or something?"

"Do you trust your friends not to turn on you?"

"Well, some of them, but they are people."

"Ah, of course."

Kathan frowned. "You know what I mean, I think." He scratched his head. "Maybe. I don't know."

"Are people only people because they are flesh and blood? Is Cassandra defined by her cheekbones and not her faith? Varric by his chest hair and not his wit?"

"Shave Varric and he's still Varric. Shut him up and he's..." Could you actually shut Varric up? "Okay. Yeah. I get what you're saying. Ain't the body, it's the mind."

"I..." Solas looked surprised. And pleased. "Thank you. Few are willing to entertain such a notion."

#

"So how many dragons have you killed?" Kathan fell into step next to Cassandra.

"I did not count." Cassandra shook her head.

"But you killed some of the big ones, right?"

"There..." Cassandra sighed. "Was a high dragon, yet. But I did not do it alone."

"Still..." Kathan spread his hands. "That's awesome. Kas wouldn't even let me leave camp the time they went up against a dragon, and it wasn't even one of the big ones."

"I am surprised she did not wish your assistance." Cassandra raised an eyebrow.

"Well, I was only like nine at the time." He shrugged. "I think maybe she was afraid I'd want to keep it as a pet."

"Dragons cannot be tamed." Cassandra shook her head.

"You just like crushing my dreams, don't you?" He grinned down at her, and she made that noise again. He was starting to find it strangely adorable.

#

"So this artifact thing can strengthen the Veil?"

"And measure it, in a manner that may allow us to predict where new tears may open."

"It sews it back together or what?"

Solas glanced up at Kathan. "Let us go back to the water analogy, only this time the pond is frozen over."

"Okay."

"The Breach is throwing rocks into the pond, cracking the ice. This artifact makes the area around it colder..."

"And the ice gets thicker..." Kathan nodded. "And it tells you where the ice is still thin?"

"Indeed."

"So the part of the Fade you were walking in got a little colder, clued you in it was here?"

"If we continue the analogy, yes."

"Right so..." Kathan narrowed his eyes. "Hold that thought." He whipped one of his daggers into the back of the demon attacking an elven woman, and surged forward alongside Cassandra.

#

"Veilfire lights these weird runes up?" Kathan scratched at the

symbol.

"It resonates with the runes, allowing the information stored within to be revealed. Veilfire has many..." Solas sighed, and stared ahead at the rune. "You are trying to light me on fire with it, aren't you?"

"Um..." Kathan pulled the torch back from Solas's coattails. "No? Hey, think we could get this to burn on our armor? It would look awesome."

Cassandra rolled her eyes and headed out of the cave. Kathan grinned after her, then glanced back at Solas. "So was it what you said that freaked the other elf out, or the fact that you could say it?"

Solas blinked at him. "A measure of both, I imagine."

"How'd you know she was lying?" Kathan glanced down at him as they started out of the ruins.

He stumbled slightly. "You speak elven?"

"Picked up a smattering, here and there." Kathan shrugged. "Speak a bit of dwarf too, mostly the fun words."

"It was clear she was not being entirely honest." Solas paused briefly to examine the veil sconce, and glanced back towards the ruins. "How did you know what she found would be useful to me?"

"It was shiny. So are you."

"Could I request a nickname that is not a commentary on my lack of hair?" Solas sighed as he headed out of the ruins.

"You could." Kathan grinned as he followed. "Wouldn't do you much good, but you could."

#

"What the hell just happened?"

Cassandra cleaned the blade of her sword. "We don't know what these rifts can do. That one appeared to alter the time around it."

"We need to find what did..." Kathan shook his head. "That."

Solas was touching the ground near where one of the strange lights had been. "Agreed."

#

"We've spread word the Inquisition was coming, but you should know that no one here was expecting us."

Kathan rubbed one of his horns. "Not even Fiona?"

"If she was, she hasn't told anyone." The scout straightened. "We've arranged use of the tavern for the negotiations."

An elf ran up to tell them that somebody named Magister Alexius was

in charge. A magister. Well, great. This was going to get him set on fire again. They started towards the tavern.

"The Veil is weaker here than in Haven. And not merely weak, but altered in a way I have not seen."

Cassandra looked like she wanted to reach for her sword. "We should talk to the Grand Enchanter."

"Keep an ear or nose or whatever out, Shiny. Let us know if anything is going to leap out of the Fade and eat our faces."

Iron Bull shot him a glare. "Great. You just had to put that image into my head."

"Hide behind Blackwall." Kathan shrugged. "It's common knowledge that fade-jumpers are intimidated by beards."

"What?" Iron Bull blinked.

"There are reasons the dwarves are rarely troubled by demons." Solas nodded. Kathan had to give credit where it was due. Shiny's lips didn't so much as twitch. Sera, Blackwall, and Iron Bull all stared at him.

"He's kidding, right?" Sera shook her head, then looked at Cassandra. "Right?"

She made that noise again, and headed into the village.

#

"They made these things out of..." Kathan growled. "But the tranquil can't even defend themselves."

"Every skull was...?" Sera started shaking her head. "No. Done thinking about it. Done."

"I had wondered what had become of them when the mages rebelled. What a tragic waste." Solas gave the skulls a sorrowful look.

"Whoever thought this up needs their head busted. Let's go find this magister ass."

#

Fiona looked at him as if she'd never seen him before. Funny, he'd have thought he stood out in a crowd. "Is this some sort of test? We're here because you walked up to us in Val Royeaux and said 'hey, come to Redcliffe and talk mages'."

"You must be mistaken. I haven't been to Val Royeaux since before the Conclave."

"Well, that's odd. Do you have a twin sister? Cause the lady we talked to looked exactly like you." Right down to the same stain on the hem of her robes, and scar just under the right ear.

"Exactly like me? I suppose it could be magic at work, but why would anyone..." Fiona shook her head in confusion. "Whoever..." She looked

up at him. "Or whatever brought you here, the situation has changed. The free mages have already..." Fiona gestured at the people in the room. "Pledged themselves to the service of the Tevinter Imperium."

Well, that was a definition of 'free' he'd never heard before. Cassandra spoke up from where she was standing behind him. "An alliance with Tevinter? Do you not fear all of Thedas turning against you?"

Solas kept his voice gentle. "I understand that you are afraid, but you deserve better than slavery to Tevinter."

Fiona continued. "As one indentured to a magister, I no longer have the authority to negotiate with you."

"I thought mages were supposed to be smart." Kathan wanted to growl in frustration.

"All hope of peace died with Justinia. This..." Fiona almost seemed to shrink before his eyes. "Bargain with Tevinter would not have been my first choice, but we had no choice. We are losing this war. I needed to save as many of my people as I could."

Footsteps. Kathan turned to see two men dressed in Tevinter style clothing. Elder and younger, with some resemblance between them. Father and son then? And the younger had that look of illness. The elder spoke as he approached. "Welcome, my friends." His voice was cheerful. He was up to some shit. "I apologize for not greeting you earlier."

The former grand enchanter made the introductions. "Agents of the Inquisition, allow me to introduce Magister Gereon Alexius."

"The southern mages are under my command." Alexius was almost dismissive of Fiona. He gave Kathan a look that put his back up just a bit. "And you are the survivor, yes? The one from the Fade? Interesting."

Might as well get to the point. "What is this alliance shit?"

Despite the crudity of his words, Alexius's face lost not a whit of it's good cheer. Definitely up to something. "What specifically do you wish to know?"

"This indentured business?" He lowered his head, playing up his appearance as a brute.

"Our southern brethren have no legal status in the Imperium." Alexius actually patted Fiona on the shoulder. "As they were not born citizens of Tevinter, they must work for a period of ten years before gaining full rights. As their protector, I shall oversee their work for the Imperium."

"When the hell did this happen?"

"When the Conclave was destroyed, these poor souls faced the brutality of the templars, who rushed to attack them." Alexius kept up his cheer, but seemed to be relaxing a little. "It could only be

through divine providence that I arrived when I did."

"It was certainly..." Fiona furrowed her brow. "Very timely."

"What do the Vints need more mages for anyway?"

"For the moment, the southern mages are a considerable expense." Alexius gestured at the room. "After they are properly trained, they will join our legion."

The protest from Fiona came immediately. "You said not all my people would be military. There are children, those not suited -"

"And one day, I'm sure they will all be productive citizens of the Imperium. When their debts are paid."

"And where are the Arl's people?" He hadn't seen hide nor hair of Fereldan colors.

"The arl of Redcliffe left the village."

Cassandra folded her arms. "Arl Teagan did not abandon his lands during the Blight, even when they were under siege."

"There were..." Alexius was starting to get a hint of impatience behind his eyes. "Tensions growing. I did not want an incident."

This was all too neat. And the guy was way too friendly for how Kathan was acting. A vint, playing nice with a belligerent qunari? It didn't add up. He needed to get back to the Leliana and see what her birds could do with the information. "We came for mages."

Alexius gestured at a nearby table, then went to go take a seat. Kathan sat across from him, forward in the chair to keep his weapons free. "Felix, would you send for a scribe, please? Pardon my manners. My son, Felix, friends." Alexius gestured at the young man in yellow. Kathan gave him a nod. He was getting a completely different sense from Felix than he was getting from Alexius. Whatever was going on, Felix didn't like it. "I'm not surprised you're here." Alexius's voice continued with the same false cordiality. "Containing the Breach is not a feat that many could ever attempt. There is no telling how many mages would be needed for such an endeavor. Ambitious, indeed."

"When you are fighting a big damn hole in the sky, thinking small gets you nowhere."

"There will have to be -"

Alexius was interrupted by Felix stumbling. The elder man's face went from false friendly to concerned father immediately. Kathan moved, catching Felix before the man could fall. Felix pressed something into his hand and Kathan set him into the chair, using him to block Alexius's view as he slipped the parchment into his belt. "Felix," Magister Alexis called.

"I'm so sorry. Please forgive my clumsiness, my lord." He glanced up at Kathan before turning to give his father a reassuring nod. "I'm fine, Father."

"Come, I'll get your powders." Magister Alexis went to his son's side and started to half-carry him out of the room. "Please excuse me, friends. We will have to continue this another time. Fiona, I will require your services."

"I don't mean to trouble everyone," Felix said.

"I shall send word to the Inquisition. We will conclude this business at a later date."

He took the parchment from his belt, and passed it to Cassandra. "Come to the Chantry. You are in danger."

"Well, aren't we secret." Sera grinned.

"They've set the trap." Kathan shrugged. "Only polite to go step in it."

#

There was a tranquil. Kathan went over to him, and got a bit more information. He then sent the man to where the Inquisition soldiers were. No way in hell was he leaving a tranquil in Redcliff with this shit. A couple mages actually seemed to like the idea of going to Tevinter, but most were leery.

The elven man who'd told him about Alexius in the first place met him just outside the tavern. "Were you really looking to ally with us?"

"That so hard to believe?"

"Everyone blames us. The templars left the Chantry, too. That's worse, isn't it? They took an oath." Fear was evident on the man's face. "Yet everyone calls it the 'mage rebellion.' We're the ones they hate. What choice did we have? Stay and be slaves?"

"Sometimes to achieve the world one desires, one must take regrettable measures." Solas nodded to the younger elf.

"I..." The man swallowed. "I hope you can do something. Tying ourselves to Tevinter...?" He shook his head. "That can't be the right way to end this."

He asked the guy a few more questions. Alexius had been on the scene awfully fast. "We'll do what we can."

Kathan led his companions towards the chantry. "This sitting right with anybody?"

"No." Cassandra spoke for them all.

"Alright. Let's go hit things until they start making some bleeding sense."

#

Another Vint. This one fighting demons. How refreshing. With the new guy's help, they got the demons dead and the rift sealed. The Vint



turned towards them. "Fascinating. How does that work, exactly?" He punctuated his words with overdone gestures. "You don't even know, do you? You just wiggle your fingers, and boom. Rift closes."

"And you are?"

"Ah, getting ahead of myself again, I see." The man bowed with a flourish. "Dorian of House Pavus, most recently of Minrathous. How do you do?"

"Another Tevinter." Cassandra kept her hand on her sword. "Be cautious with this one."

"Suspicious friends you have here." Dorian shrugged. "Magister Alexius was once my mentor, so my assistance should be valuable - as I'm sure you can imagine."

"And Felix?"

"I'm sure he's on his way. He was to give you the note, then meet us here after ditching his father." Dorian waved a hand carelessly.

"What's really wrong with Felix?"

Dorian gave him a surprised look. "He's had some lingering illness for months. Felix is an only child, and Alexius is being a mother hen, most likely."

"No audience here but us, and we ain't in the mood to applaud."

"What, there's no applause? Fine." Dorian folded his arms. "Look, you must know there's danger. That should be obvious even without the note. Let's start with Alexius claiming the allegiance of the mage rebels out from under you. As if by magic, yes?" He began gesturing again. "Which is exactly right. To reach Redcliffe before the Inquisition, Alexius distorted time itself."

A set of ripples starts moving backwards, and the whole pattern distorts. "He arranged it so he could arrive here just after the Divine died?"

"You catch on quick."

"That is fascinating, if true..." Solas watched the other man. "And almost certainly dangerous."

"The rift you closed here?" Dorian pointed at where it had been. "You saw how it twisted time around itself, sped some things up and slowed others down. Soon there will be more like it, and they'll appear further and further away from Redcliffe. The magic Alexius is using is wildly unstable, and it's unraveling the world."

"Shiny, this making sense to you?"

"It could explain the distortions."

"I know what I'm talking about." Dorian's voice grew defensive. "I helped develop this magic. When I was still his apprentice, it was

pure theory. Alexius could never get it to work. What I don't understand is why he's doing it? Ripping time to shreds just to gain a few hundred lackeys?"

"He didn't do it for them." Kathan turned at the sound of Felix's voice.

"Took you long enough." Dorian gave the other man a worried look. "Is he getting suspicious?"

"No, but I shouldn't have played the illness card. I thought he'd be fussing over me all day." He gave Kathan a slight bow. "My father's joined a cult. Tevinter supremacists. They call themselves 'Venatori'" He shook his head. "And I can tell you one thing: whatever he's done for them, he's done it to get to you."

"All this for me?" Kathan shrugged. "And here I didn't get Alexius anything."

"Send him a fruit basket. Everyone loves those." Dorian shrugged. "You know you're his target. Expecting the trap is the first step in turning it to your advantage. I can't stay in Redcliffe. Alexius doesn't know I'm here, and I want to keep it that way for now. But whenever you're ready to deal with him, I want to be there. I'll be in touch." He started to walk away, then glanced back at Felix. "And Felix? Try not to get yourself killed."

"There are worse things than dying, Dorian."

#

"So, before, the Veil and magic were like a pool of water. But the Breach opens, shit gets weird, and now we are standing in what, a pool of jelly?"

"I would not put it that way, exactly. However, you are heading in the correct direction. The Breach is having an effect on the behavior of magic, as well as the behavior of spirits and even creatures that come in contact with fluctuations of the Veil."

"So..." Kathan shrugged. "Fix the Breach or we are fucked?"

"If we wish to be blunt, yes." Solas shrugged.

Kathan growled. "Let's finish up here and get back to Haven. We need a plan."

#

"That's..."

"A horse." Sera giggled at his nonplussed expression.

Kathan shook his head. "What the hell am I supposed to do with a horse?" Solas glanced at the horse, then back at Kathan, and then back at the horse. Kathan narrowed his eyes. "Shut up."

"I said nothing."

"Yeah, but you said it really loud."

Cassandra covered her mouth with a hand as she tried not to laugh.

#

They escorted the healer to the Crossroads, and checked in with Corporal Vale, and learned the area was doing well. Some of the refugees were even expressing an interest in joining the Inquisition. Kathan suggested Vale put them together into a group of irregulars.

He found Cassandra looking over the area from a small vantage point. She glanced at him when he joined her. "They've started making the area defensible." She gestured at some fencing.

"Bit late, ain't it? We've cleared most of the trouble out." He shrugged. "I asked Scribbles to send a note back to Generally Works Too Hard to get some folks out for building those watchtowers."

"Scrib..." Cassandra blinked. "Varric and Cullen." She rolled her eyes. "I suppose I should be grateful you have not saddled me with a nickname."

"Who says I haven't?" He grinned at her.

She put a hand on her sword and gave him a slightly threatening look. "Do I even want to know?"

"Butterfly."

"I will stab you."

"Chrysanthemum."

"Repeatedly."

"Sugarpie."

"In the face."

"Sundew."

Cassandra started to actually pull her sword out of the sheath, and he held up his hands. "Hey, in qunlat, the word for Sundew is Kasaanda. That's pretty close."

"You would nickname me a carnivorous plant?" She narrowed her eyes.

"Huh. Good point." He rubbed his head. "This is going to require some thought. I think I'll go with my initial inclination." He tilted his head. "Rose."

"Rose?" She gave him a suspicious look.

"Sure. It's tough and beautiful." He grinned. "And if you don't treat it with respect, it will stab the shit out of you."

"I..." She pushed her sword back into its sheath. A smile played around the edges of her mouth. "Have been called worse."

#

"The letter from Alexius asked for the Herald of Andraste by name. It's an obvious trap." Josephine waved her pen.

"How sweet." He put a hand over his heart. "What's he say about me?"

Leliana shrugged. "He's so complimentary that we are certain he wants to kill you."

Kathan sighed as they started arguing again. Cullen made his stance the clearest. "If you go in there, you'll die. And we'll lose the only means we have of closing these rifts. I won't allow it." Awww, Generally Stoic cared. The bickering continued.

"The magister's son, Felix, told me Alexius is in a cult that's obsessed with me." They all turned at the sound of his voice, as if they'd almost forgotten he was still standing there. "Doubt they are going to say 'oh, too bad' when we say I'm not coming and go on with their lives."

"They will remain a threat, and a powerful one, unless we act." Leliana nodded to him.

Cassandra stood up straighter. "We cannot accept defeat now. There must be a solution."

"Always more than one way into a castle. Got to be somebody who knows something."

Leliana started to smile. "There is a secret passage into the castle, an escape route for the family. It's too narrow for our troops, but we could send agents through."

"Too risky. Those agents will be discovered well before they reach the magister."

"That's why we need a distraction. Perhaps the envoy Alexius wants to badly?"

Cullen nodded. "Keep attention on Adaar while we disable the magister's defenses. It's a gamble, but it might work."

They were interrupted by the arrival of Dorian, and his offer to help. He pointed out he could get the agents past the magical wards. Seems they had a plan. He couldn't wait to see how it all went to hell.

"This plan puts you in the most danger." Cullen met Kathan's eyes. "We can't, in good conscience, order you to do this. We can still go after the templars if you'd rather not play the bait. It's up to you."

He'd told a bunch of people in Redcliffe he'd try to help them. "I'll be fine. Trouble starts, I'll just throw Cassandra at it."

Cassandra made the noise again. He grinned.

#

"You are wearing that to a diplomatic function." Josephine narrowed her eyes at him.

"No, I'm wearing this to go punch a magister's face in." Kathan grinned at her.

"When you return, I am going to have some more appropriate attire for you to wear."

"This is armor. I'm fighting demons."

"There are several nobles that wish to meet with the Herald."

"Well, if I see him, I'll let him know."

She raised an eyebrow, and tapped her foot against the stone floor. "I will speak with Harritt about having some..." She shook her head. "Armor made that is more suitable to your station."

He looked down at the antaam-saar. Harritt had repaired the damage he'd done to it earlier, but perhaps a new set would be needed. He was just pretty sure that wasn't what Josephine had in mind. "I'm a qunari mercenary. This is suitable for my station."

"You are the Herald of Andraste."

"Am not."

She folded her arms, and stared up at him. "You are very much..."

"Not."

For a moment, she just stood there, looking at him. Then she nodded. "I will speak with Vivienne regarding a more appropriate look."

Kathan shook his head. "Ganging up on me is so incredibly not fair." He frowned. "Hey, I had a question."

"Yes?" She put the polite expression back on her face.

"Am I gonna get paid for this shit?" Josephine stared at him again before turning and walking away. He sighed, and rubbed a horn. "I think that was a no."

#

"The Magister's invitation was for Master Adaar only. These others will have to remain here." The man gave them all a very disapproving look.

"I don't go anywhere without my sisters." He wasn't sure who gave him the most disbelieving look, the man, Cassandra, or Solas.

The man's mouth worked silently for a couple moments as he tried to

figure out how to respond, and then he simply turned and led them up down the hall. "My lord magister, the agents of the Inquisition have arrived."

"My friend." Alexius stood up from where he'd been sitting in the Arl's throne. "It's so good to see you again. And your associates, of course." He clearly wasn't entirely pleased that Kathan had shown up accompanied. "I'm sure we can work out some arrangement that is equitable to all parties."

"Are we mages to have no voice in deciding our fate?"

"Fiona, you would not have turned your followers over to my care if you did not trust me with their lives."

"You just ooze trustworthiness, Alexius." Kathan shrugged.

"Yes, the Magisterium tells me that so often. Shall we begin our talks? The Inquisition needs mages to close the Breach, and I have them. So, what shall you offer in exchange?" Alexius reseated himself in the Arl's throne. If he was Fereldan, he'd probably find that offensive. What was with the dogs everywhere?

"First let's talk Venatori." Seriously, the sheer number of canine eyes staring at him was just a bit creepy.

"Now, where could you have heard that name?" Alexius leaned forward in the chair.

"I told him." Felix turned towards his father.

"Felix, what have you done?"

Kathan made a slight gesture at Solas to indicate Felix, and saw the man nod. Trouble started, Felix was going to need some of that protective magic. "We stuck a stick in your trap before we came in. That's alright, right?"

"I've yet to see your cleverness, I'm afraid." All congeniality vanished from Alexius. "You walk into my stronghold with your stolen mark - a gift you don't even understand - and think you're in control? You're nothing but a mistake."

If he had a silver for every time he'd heard that, he'd be getting paid for this shit. "So what was the point of tearing a hole in the sky?"

"It was to be a triumphant moment for the Elder One, for this world."

"Father, listen to yourself. Do you know what you sound like?"

Dorian's voice filled the room. "He sounds like exactly the sort of villainous cliché everyone expects us to be." Credit where it was due, guy knew how to make an entrance. And his presence meant their agents were in place.

"Dorian." Alexius looked like he'd taken a bite out of Kas's cooking. "I gave you the chance to be part of this. You turned me down. The

Elder One has power you would not believe. He will raise the Imperium from its own ashes."

"Blah blah, my cult is better than yours." He had how many cults now? At least one with far better fashion sense. "Heard it a thousand times."

"Well, you know, it's a chance for the Imperium to really one-up that whole 'starting the Blight' thing." Dorian smiled. He could get to like that guy.

Alexius clearly wasn't entertained. "He will make the world bow to mages once more. We will rule from the Boeric Ocean to the Frozen Seas."

"You can't involve my people in this." Fiona had that look he recognized as a mage getting ready to light someone on fire. Hopefully, it wouldn't be him.

"Alexius, this is exactly what you and I talked about never wanting to happen. Why would you support this?" Dorian stepped forward.

"Stop it, Father. Give up the Venatori. Let the southern mages fight the Breach, and let's go home."

"No." Alexius whirled and put a hand on his son's shoulder. "It's the only way, Felix. He can save you."

"Save me?"

"There is a way. The Elder One promised. If I undo the mistake at the Temple..."

"I'm going to die. You need to accept that."

"Seize them, Venatori. The Elder One demands this man's life." Alexius looked around the room, and his eyes widened.

"Your men are dead, Alexius."

"You..." Alexius shoved Felix behind the throne. "Are a mistake. You should never have existed." Something glowed in the man's hand as he stepped forward towards Kathan.

"No." Dorian's staff glowed. There was a flash of something.

#

He was standing knee deep in water. In a cell. With two very surprised looking guards. "Blood of the Elder One." They lifted their weapons.

Not friends then. He threw a dagger into the throat of one and met the other with a lunge and knife to the stomach.

"Displacement? Interesting." Dorian was looking around them. Kathan saw no sign of Cassandra or Solas. "It's probably not what Alexius intended. The rift must have moved us..." Dorian frowned. "To what? The closest confluence of arcane energy?"

Why was the guy asking him? "The last thing I remember, we were in the castle hall." He retrieved his knives.

"Let's see. If we're still in the castle, it isn't..." Dorian's eyes widened. "Oh, of course. It's not simply where - it's when. Alexius used the amulet as a focus. It moved us through time."

No doubt to the deep, shark infested part of the pool of water. "Forward, back, how far..."

"Those are excellent questions." Dorian gestured. "We'll have to find out, won't we? Let's look around, see where the rift took us. Then we can figure out how to get back..." He shrugged. "If we can."

"Really hope you got a plan." There had been a plan. Maybe they should stop with the planning.

"I have some thoughts on that. They're lovely thoughts, like little jewels."

#

They moved through the creepy castle. That red lyrium was everywhere. Along with corpses and rot and other general unpleasantness. "Future."

"I concur."

"Don't recall this part of the castle."

"It was covered in the tackiest carvings of wolves and dogs I'd ever seen." Dorian looked around. "This is not an improvement."

"Well, when we get back to our time, we can suggest they add some hanging plants." Kathan looked around. "Maybe a tasteful rug?"

#

How the hell many cells did a castle need anyway? He was about to turn back when he heard a familiar voice. "Is someone there?"

Kathan walked towards the cell to see Solas. The man gave him a shocked look. "You're alive? We saw you die."

"The spell Alexius cast displaced us in time. We just got here, so to speak." Dorian explained as Kathan picked the lock on the cell.

"Can you reverse the process? You could return and obviate the events of the last year. It may not be too late..." Solas stepped out of the cell as soon as Kathan got it open.

"Glad somebody understood that." He frowned. There was red in Solas's eyes. It seemed to hang around the man in a haze. And there was something wrong with his voice. And... His eyes went to the red lyrium growing out of a wall nearby. Fuck.

"You would think such understanding would stop me from making such terrible mistakes. You would be wrong." Solas shook his head.



He caught Solas's shoulder. "You look like shit." He gave the man a worried look. Something was off, slightly. More than just the red glow around him. And more than usual.

"I am dying, but no matter. If you can undo this, they can all be saved. But you know nothing of this world. It is far worse than you understand. Alexius served a master. The Elder One. He reigns now, unchallenged. His minions assassinated Empress Celene and used the chaos to invade the South. The Elder One commands an army of demons. After you stop Alexius, you must be prepared."

"Any more good news?" Kathan sighed. "Allies, anything like that?" He offered Solas a staff. "You up for a fight?"

"If there is any hope, any way to save them..." Solas took the staff. "My life is yours. This world is an abomination. It must never come to pass."

#

Kathan heard Cassandra praying. He walked to the cell slowly, knowing what he was going to find. The same red haze hung around her, and he felt a cold anger starting to rise inside him. She stared up at him, her face disbelieving and then, hopeful. "You've returned to us. Can it be? Has Andraste given us another chance? Maker forgive me. I failed you. I failed everyone. The end must truly be upon us if the dead return to life."

He picked the lock, and yanked the door open. "I'm not dead, Cassandra. It's..." He offered her a hand. "Hard to explain."

She stared at his hand. "I was there. The magister obliterated you with a gesture."

"Alexius sent us forward in time. If we find him, we may be able to return to the present." Dorian leaned on his staff, just outside the cell door.

Kathan narrowed his eyes. "And I'll make sure the son of a bitch pays."

Cassandra's eyes were red, glowing in her pale face. Her hand took his, and he pulled her to her feet. "None of this will happen. Andraste, please let that be true."

"We'll have to go up." Solas gestured. "I've heard the guards saying that Alexius barricaded himself in the throne room."

#

Fiona was able to tell them the date. And show him the fate that awaited Solas and Cassandra if he failed. No fucking way that was happening. "That magister's going to regret he didn't just kill me."

Time to find an amulet.

#

Guards came towards them. Dorian blinked as the qunari man charged forward, faster than he'd have expected a man that size to be able to move. The first guard was simply caught and flung off the bridge. The next got a dagger in the face. The last got his shield between himself and the furious young qunari, only for Cassandra to run him through from behind.

The next group died just as quickly.

#

He heard a scream. It was Leliana's. He hit the door with his shoulder, smashing it open. The torturer turned to face him, and Leliana wrapped her legs around his neck. There was a cracking sound, and the man fell limp. Kathan began freeing the woman. "Not bad."

"Anger is stronger than any pain." Her eyes went to the bodies lying on the table. An elven man and... fuck. Ruffles. "Do you have weapons?" Kathan handed her a bow, and then a quiver. "Good. The magister's probably in his chambers."

Dorian tried to talk to Leliana. She was having none of it. "We'll get back, Leliana. I won't let this happen. Not to you, not to..." He growled, and turned back to the door.

#

Cassandra gutted a venatori. "May Andraste have mercy on your souls. No one else will."

Kathan took the red shard from a corpse and tossed it to Dorian. "How many more?"

"Er... two."

"Let's go." He moved through the castle, Cassandra at his side.

They exchanged fierce and bitter smiles. Cassandra kicked down a door, and Kathan flung himself inside to slash open the venatori inside. He was moving forward before they had finished falling. Magic died in the mage's eyes as Kathan jammed one of his knives up under the man's ribs and into his heart. He caught the scent of burning flesh as Solas incinerated an archer.

He didn't bother to finish off the gurgling warrior, choking on his own blood, before leaving the room to find the last piece.

#

He saw the man standing before the fire. "Alexius." Kathan started towards him.

"And here you are. Finally." Alexius didn't bother to turn towards them. A ghoul crouched nearby. "I knew you would appear again. Not that it would be now. But I knew I hadn't destroyed you."

"Sort of wanted a bit more fight out of you." Kathan drew his blades.

"Alas, I am not the foe you remember. All that I fought for, all that I betrayed, and what have I wrought? Ruin and death. There is nothing else. The Elder One comes: for me, for you, for us all."

Leliana caught the ghoul and laid a knife against his throat. "Felix," Alexius cried out.

"That's Felix?" Next to him, Dorian stepped forward, his face and voice horrified. "Maker's breath, Alexius, what have you done?"

"He would have died, Dorian." Alexius pointed at Felix. "I saved him." He gave them a pleading look. "Please, don't hurt my son. I'll do anything you ask."

There was nothing left to be done for Felix. All that remained was mercy. Kathan nodded to Leliana. "You didn't save him, Alexius. No one should live like that." Leliana drew the blade across Felix's throat.

"No." Magic burst out of Alexius in response.

#

Dorian knelt by Alexius's side, and closed the man's eyes. "He wanted to die, didn't he. All those lies he told himself, the justifications..." He rose slowly. "He lost Felix long ago and didn't even notice. Oh, Alexius..."

Kathan looked down at the blood-coated blades in his hands, and then at where Solas and Cassandra were standing. He wasn't sure killing the man once had been enough. It would have to be. "The one back in the past could still see sense." Or have sense beat into him. That was good too.

"I suppose that's true." Dorian looked down at the amulet he was clutching. "This is the same amulet he used before. I think it's the same one we made in Minrathous. That's a relief. Give me an hour to work out the spell he used, and I should be able to reopen the rift."

"An hour?" Leliana stepped forward. "That's impossible. You must go now." Dust fell as the castle shook. "The Elder One."

"You cannot stay here." Solas gestured. Then he turned to Cassandra. She nodded, and he returned the nod before turning back to Leliana. "We'll hold the outer door. When they get past us, it will be your turn."

Kathan wanted to stop them. To find the words. All he managed was a snarl.

"The only way we live is if this day never comes." Leliana's ruined face was set in hard lines. Solas and Cassandra began walking out the door. "Cast your spell. You have as much time as I have arrows."

#

Cassandra blinked. One moment, Kathan had been standing there, next to Dorian. And then they were both standing there again, looking like

they'd seen action. Kathan was bleeding from a wound in his side, and Dorian's robes were torn and stained with blood. The big man took two steps forward and grabbed Alexius by the throat, lifting him off the ground with one hand.

"You'll have to do better than that," Dorian said.

"Is that it?" Kathan's teeth were bared. "That's your best?" He shook Alexius, and all trace of the friendly young man was gone from his face.

Alexius gripped the man's arm, but stopped fighting. "You won. There is no point in extending this charade." He went to his knees when Kathan dropped him. The Herald took a few steps away, turning his back on Alexius and taking several deep breaths. "Felix..." Alexius turned to look at his son.

Felix knelt beside him. "It's going to be all right, Father."

"You'll die."

"Everyone dies."

She saw Kathan meet her eyes. The smile of relief he gave her... why were there butterflies in her stomach? Cassandra swallowed, and started to walk forward to check on him.

"Well, I'm glad that's over with." Dorian turned towards them. The door to the hall came open, and soldiers began marching into the room. "Or not."

#

"Grand Enchanter, we'd like to discuss your abuse of our hospitality."

"Your majesties." Fiona looked like someone had just punched her in the stomach, possibly after killing her kitten.

"When we offered the mages sanctuary, we did not give them the right to drive our people from their homes."

"King Alistair, Queen Cathiel, I assure you, we never intended..." Fiona was looking back and forth between them desperately.

"In light of your actions, good intentions are no longer enough." The woman... er... queen... might be wearing a dress, but Kathan'd wager she was just a hair from walking forward and punching Fiona right in the face. He wasn't entirely sure he'd blame her. He was still having a little trouble calming down himself. He snuck another glance at Solas and Cassandra. They looked fine.

King Alistair stepped forward, and it occurred to Kathan that the man had once been a templar. He imagined that was also occurring to Fiona at the moment. "You and your followers have worn out your welcome. Leave Ferelden, or we'll be forced to make you leave."

"But..." Fiona's face was desperate. "We have hundreds who need protection. Where will we go?"

Well, shit. He stepped out of the alcove he'd been using for shelter. And saw both the King and Queen give him surprised looks. "I should point out that we did come here for mages to close the Breach."

"And what are the terms of this arrangement?' Fiona asked. Was the woman serious? She thought there was still room to negotiate? She'd been willing to feed her followers to Tevinter, for crying out loud. The Inquisition could tell them they'd all have to start dressing as giant pink rabbits and they'd have to take the offer. And it was tempting.

Dorian spoke before he could. "Hopefully better than what Alexius gave you. The Inquisition is better than that, yes?"

Cassandra and Solas had vastly different opinions. No surprise there. Fiona turned towards him. Why was... Oh shit. They were going to leave it up to him, weren't they? He was not getting paid for this shit. "It seems we have little choice but to accept whatever you offer."

Look. A cliff. Time to jump off it. "You'll be our allies. We've got a big fucking hole to fill in."

It took Fiona a moment to process what he'd just said. "A generous offer." She looked as if she didn't dare hope. "But will the rest of the Inquisition honor it?"

"It's the world at stake. No more of this divide and conquer shit. We'll stand together." He folded his arms.

"It's a generous offer." King Alistair turned his eyes to Fiona, but for a moment, Kathah was pretty sure the man had actually looked pleased at the outcome. "I doubt you're going to get a better one from us."

"We accept." Fiona nodded eagerly. "It would be madness not to. I will gather my people and ready them for the journey to Haven. The Breach will be closed. You will not regret giving us this chance." She immediately turned and left.

From behind him, he heard Cassandra's voice. "We'll discuss this. Later."

Damn it. She was going to put him back in the stocks.

#

"You're the Herald of Andraste?" King Alistair raised an eyebrow.

"Um..." Kathah shuffled his feet as he stared at the man whose country he had just technically invaded. "No?"

The King of Ferelden gave him a surprisingly sympathetic smile. "And these are?"

"Oh, right." Kathah turned around. "This is the god of hitting things with fire, the god of hitting things with lightning, and the goddess of hitting things with swords." He pointed at Dorian, Solas, and

Cassandra. "They're with me."

King Alistair started laughing, and the queen made a frustrated noise that was echoed by Cassandra. "I think I like you, Herald." King Alistair shook his head. "Tell Leliana the next time she invades our country she needs to stop by for tea first."

#### 4. Chapter 4

They yelled at him about the mages. That part didn't surprise him. Cullen turned to Cassandra. "You were there, Seeker. Why didn't you intervene?"

"While I may not completely agree with the decision, I support it." Now that part surprised him. He'd been sort of expecting his horns to end up as her new drinking cups. "The sole point of the Herald's mission was to gain the mage's aid, and that was accomplished."

"The voice of pragmatism speaks. And here I was just starting to enjoy the circular arguments." Dorian leaned on one of the chantry's wooden pillars.

Cassandra's voice was firm. "Closing the Breach is all that matters."

"Saw what happens if we fuck it up. Let's not."

"We will not fail." Cassandra smiled up at him. Made him feel a bit warm.

Leliana was fast to see the advantage of the knowledge he'd brought back. Rather than inflict his handwriting on them, he'd asked Solas to play scribe and write down everything he could remember while it was still fresh. He'd had Dorian to do the same thing on the other side of the camp, giving them two separate accounts. Leliana was holding both parchments. "The assassination of Empress Celene? A demon army?"

"Sounds like something a Tevinter cult might do." Dorian spread his hands. "Orlais falls, the Imperium rises. Chaos for everyone."

"One battle at a time." Cullen took a breath, and rested his hands on his sword hilt. "It's going to take time to organize our troops and the mage recruits. Let's take this to the war room." He nodded to Kathah. "Join us. None of this means anything without your mark, after all."

"And here I'd been hoping to kick back. Take a nap. Learn to knit."

Cullen actually laughed. "What is it they say? 'No rest for the wicked'?"

Josephine gestured at the war room. "Meet us there when you're ready."

"I'll skip the war council, but I would like to see this Breach up close, if you don't mind."

"You're staying?" Kathan raised an eyebrow at Dorian.

Dorian grinned. "Oh, didn't I mention? The South is so charming and rustic. I adore it to little pieces."

Kathan shrugged, and then turned to Cullen. "He followed me home. Can I keep him?"

#

Vivienne yelled at him too. Well, not yelled. She never raised her voice, and barely even changed her polite tone. But her displeasure was clear. "If Fiona and her malcontents are joining us as allies, we need to be prepared. Abominations are inevitable." She smoothed a hand down her sleeve. "Cullen doesn't have enough templars to handle incidents. Some of the rank and file need to be trained."

"Yeah, good idea. But not open. Give them a chance, with them thinking they aren't watched." Give them a chance to show their true colors. People had a way of being surprising, if you gave them half a chance.

One of her eyebrows arched. "I like the way you think, darling. I'll have a word with Cullen. We are reliant on his people absolutely." Her face became firm. "There has never been a greater threat to mages than the Breach. Until it is closed, no one is safe."

"When you say mages are a danger, that mean you too? I mean, other than the whole 'set people on fire with a dirty look' part?"

"Of course I am, my dear. Every mage who joins the cause is taking a calculated risk, whether they know it or not. Magic is dangerous, just as fire is dangerous. Anyone who forgets this truth gets burned."

"You make sense, Silky."

She narrowed her eyes. "I am First Enchanter Vivienne. Or Madame de Fer."

"Yeah, you're iron all right, but you got silk over it. I imagine more than a few missed the iron and busted their hands takin swings."

The barest trace of a smile touched her lips. "Tell me something." She gestured lazily. "You told me that you'd see the Chantry restored. What about the Circle?"

He hasn't so much said that he'd see the Chantry restored as much as he'd said he didn't want the Chantry to be his problem anymore, but one was close enough to the other.

"Is there a reason mages aren't allowed to join the Chantry? I mean, you know the dangers of magic better than one of the moms, right?"

"A curious idea. Such twists and turns your mind takes." Vivienne gave him a look that suggested she might be reconsidering some of her opinions about him. "It's something to consider, my dear."

"So, what are circles like?" He leaned on the pillar as he continued the conversation.

#

"The remaining grand clerics sent a missive inquiring about events at the Temple of Sacred Ashes. They demand to know whether the Inquisition officially claims that Andraste saved you from the Breach. If it were up to you, how would you reply?" Josephine looked up at him.

Were they actually going to give him a choice in the matter? "I get to have an actual opinion on the matter?" He raised an eyebrow. "Will it change what you do tell them?"

"If Leliana, Cassandra, Cullen, and I could agree on our official stance, I could answer that." Josephine sighed. "We should decide soon. The revered mothers don't seem to know what to make of you."

Too many people were calling him your worship. More than a few actually bowed when they saw him, and he'd overheard someone ask if he was going to be added to the Chant. The world had gone bizarre since someone kicked a hole in the sky. "It was chance. I'm just a guy. No divine intervention."

"Yet, as rumors you're Andraste's Herald grow, the grand clerics may not believe such a humble reply." She noted something on her writing board thing. "A difficult situation, and I thank you for your answer." She looked up at him again. "Now, regarding your attire..."

"Harritt made me new armor." He gestured at the new antaam-sar. "Even used bearskin to give it an upgrade."

"It is drawing attention that is less..." She shook her head. "Befitting than we would like."

"I think that's mostly the horns." He shrugged.

"I..." Josephine looked away from him. "Not entirely. You and Iron Bull are..." She took a deep breath. "I attempted to replace your attire with more appropriate clothing, but none of the runners seemed to know where, exactly, you are staying." She walked to her desk and indicated a suit of clothing very similar to the one he'd been wearing when he first woke up.

Kathan shook his head. "I think it might be in my best interest to keep it that way."

"Herald..." She took a deep breath. "Perhaps I should have a word with Commander Cullen. You seem more inclined to listen to him. Good day to you."

#

He made sure Dorian was settling in alright. The man was getting a fair number of hostile looks from those who'd heard that Tevinter might be the source of recent problems. Kathan found himself liking the guy. Actually, it was sort of nice not having all of the funny



looks directed at the guy with the horns.

Solas seemed very pleased by the turn of events. Despite having been the one to write down Kathan's account, he still had questions. "You are certain you experienced time travel? Could it have been an illusion, a trick of the Fade?"

"Pretty sure if it was, Alexius would have imagined himself with more dignity."

"Point taken." Solas smiled. "What an amazing gift. It is vital the Inquisition succeed, to avoid the future you witnessed."

"Surprised you didn't ask questions about your own future." The image of his friends' bodies being casually tossed aside still haunted him. He'd skipped over those details other than to note that it had been the future Solas who'd given him the information. He hadn't read Dorian's account.

"I know enough. If that future happened, then I - and Cassandra, Cullen, and the rest - failed to stop this Elder One. Speaking of which..." Solas clasped his hands behind his back. "You should ready yourself."

"Yeah." He folded his arms. "I sort of fucked up this old guy's plans, didn't I?"

"Twice. Once at the Temple of Sacred Ashes..." Solas gestured at where the mages were starting to arrive. "And now again at Redcliffe. A being who aspires to godhood is unlikely to ignore such an affront."

#

"Herald..."

"Over there somewhere." Kathan waved a hand. "Ugliest dwarf you ever saw. Can't miss him."

Cullen sighed. "Josephine has asked me to have a word with you regarding..." He ran a hand down his face.

"If'n ya want, we can just pretend we had the conversation, and you were all stern and shit and I'm properly chastised." Kathan shrugged. "But I ain't wearing those jeweled up pajama things unless you are too."

"A..." Cullen tried to suppress a chuckle. "Reasonable stance. Very well. Consider yourself lectured." He hesitated a moment. "Where could I find more of those marshmallow things?"

Kathan laughed. "Varric can get more, if'n ya want." He shrugged. "That runner that tags along after you half the time, he your little brother or something?"

"Kels?" Cullen raised an eyebrow. "No actual relation." He rubbed the back of his neck. "The Champion of Kirkwall rescued him and some others from an abomination. As they had nowhere else to go, he suggested the templars consider recruiting them."

"And you didn't want to leave them behind when joining up with this bunch." Kathan nodded.

"The Champion made me promise to look out for them." Cullen nodded.

"They ain't the only ones that followed you though." He looked over the forces training. "Ain't gonna be issues for your templars, having the mages here, right? Reckon the ones that followed you are the same metal you are. Guards, not jailers."

"There are a few tensions, but..." Cullen followed his gaze down to where some of the templars were training the soldiers. "Fewer than I had feared."

"So tell me about you." Kathan turned towards him. "Cause I've read Varric's book and..." He shrugged. "Should probably give you the chance to set the record straight."

"Oh, Maker..." Cullen sighed.

#

Kathan shrugged, and went to chat with Iron Bull. The guy was pleasant enough, but it was hard not to think about the fact that he was also a member of the most dangerous of Qunari groups. At least with the soldier ones, you knew what you were getting. Krem suggested that the Chargers could go spy out what was going on with the templars, and Kathan told him to take the notion to Leliana. Blackwall was surprisingly happy with how Redcliffe had turned out. There was still something going on with that guy that made his nose itch. He glanced down at the practice field to see Cassandra arguing with a mage. He wandered over.

"And what are we supposed to do, exactly?" The mage sounded irate about something.

Cassandra had her belligerent face on. "What you always do: complain."

"We've already spoken with Commander Cullen. No one listens." The mage threw up his hands. "We want better quarters. We want the templars kept at a distance, and some respect for -"

"This is not the Circle. You mages are our allies, not our wards. Act like it."

"How are we supposed to-"

"Deal. With. It." The mage gave Cassandra another glare before storming off. She turned towards Kathan. "It never ends, evidently."

"I noticed." The mages had the same accommodations as everyone else. Better than some, actually. He'd been sharing a room with a half dozen others before he'd grabbed his bedroll and found a place with less snoring. The mine kept him sheltered from the elements. Once Haven had started getting more crowded he'd ended up with Solas as a room mate. Mine-mate? At least he didn't snore, and having a guy who could start a campfire with a thought around was handy. And Solas

wasn't bothered by the kitten that had also taken up residence. Actually, he seemed to like the little hairball. Were the mages getting paid for this?

"I just don't know who told them I'm the one to yell at."

Probably someone with a sadistic sense of humor. He was pretty sure it had been Sera. "Is it that bad?"

"The mages are here as equals. They need to get used to what that means." She stared at him. "This is your doing, after all. You created this alliance."

"Seemed a good idea at the time." Seemed like the only idea at the time. Dragging the mages in as prisoners didn't appeal to him. Cold as it was, getting set on fire failed to seem like fun.

"Oh. I do sound like I'm blaming you, don't I" Cassandra's face softened. "I don't disapprove. In fact, you did well. You made a decision when it needed to be made." She smiled. "And here we are. I wish I could say this was my doing."

Was she... complimenting him? "You're flattering me."

"I'm not. This always happens. Nobody ever takes my meaning..." There was a slight bit of red creeping into her cheeks.

He laughed. "You should see your face."

Her eyes narrowed. "I'm thinking less flattering things now." She was cute when she was irritated. He kept laughing. She punched him. "Let's hope the Breach has your sense of humor."

#

Varric tracked the Herald down. Someone needed to buy the kid a drink. "The mage rebellion joins the Inquisition. I've got to admit, that's a twist I didn't see coming." He paid Flissa, and set a drink in front of the big guy. "One thing you saw in the future worries me. I mean, it was all bad. But red lyrium in Ferelden? Infecting people and growing out of them? That's bad." He drank. "Finding more of it really punches a hole in my 'red lyrium at the temple was a coincidence' theory."

Kathan took a drink from his own mug. "Think I'll keep thinking it was a coincidence. Like to get some sleep at some point."

"Honestly, I think I'll give up sleeping for the foreseeable future." He sighed into his mug. "I've got people trying to figure out where the red stuff came from. I think maybe we should make that a priority." He took a long drink. "But that's enough doom and gloom. You just won a big victory for the Inquisition. What're you going to do to celebrate?"

"I'm torn between taking a nap and helping Sera with her plan of giving Generally No-Fun a tattoo."

"That's..." Varric snickered. "Okay, let me know if you are going to do the latter, because I have some suggestions." One of these days, he needed to introduce this kid to Hawke and Isabela.

#

They headed back to the Hinterlands to deal with some bandits while they waited for the mages to finish preparations. Kathan and Iron Bull quickly got into a 'who can kill the most bandits' competition. Varric was rather amused when he had to inform them both that Cassandra won. Kathan immediately stuck a crown of flowers on her head and proclaimed her the queen of asskicking. She promptly kicked him in the ass, much to the amusement of the rest of the group.

Dorian proved to be just as able in the present as he had been in the future. Though he and Blackwall weren't getting along. "A Grey Warden Recruiter. That sounds interesting."

"It's not easy finding people willing to shoulder such a terrible responsibility." Blackwall nodded.

"Here I thought you poked around prisons, hunting for murderers desperate to escape the noose." Dorian waved his hand.

"That's what you think of the Wardens?" Blackwall glared. Though from what Kathan had heard and the couple Grey Warden's he'd met, Dorian wasn't far off the mark. Didn't make a lot of sense for Blackwall to get upset about it. Hadn't the guy who killed the last archdemon murdered some nobleman or another?

"It's not such a terrible thing." Dorian shrugged. "Some of my best friends are murderers."

"They are men and women, atoning for what they've done by giving of themselves. They fight for people like you. People in silks and velvets. Who talk..." Blackwall shook his head. "And judge."

Dorian raised an eyebrow. "Who's judging now?"

"I know your kind." Blackwall spat off the side of the trail.

"Awwww." Kathan smiled at them, his hand over his heart. "You two make such a cute couple."

"I..." Dorian nearly choked.

"What?" Blackwall sputtered.

"Lovely spring day, romance in the air..." Kathan waved a hand. "It's rather touching." He looked from one to the other, and then down at Varric. "They were flirting, right?"

"Looked that way to me." Varric nodded.

"Oy, can you imagine what the kids would look like?" Sera cackled.

Kathan winced, and glared at her. "You had to go and ruin the moment."

#

"You know, Viv, you're not bad with that staff." Iron Bull nodded to Vivienne.

Silky immediately put ice into her voice. "You will address me as Enchanter Vivienne, Court Mage to the Empire of Orlais, or Madame de Fer. Not, 'Viv.'"

Iron Bull swallowed. "Oh. Right, ma'am. Sorry, ma'am."

"Hmm." Vivienne nodded. "Yes, 'ma'am' works as well."

"Damn, Silky..." Kathan shook his head. "You might be scarier than Lady Ruffles."

Vivienne looked him over. "Speaking of which, she has mentioned that you are being rather stubborn on the issue of proper attire."

"Look, over there..." Kathan pointed. "Giant invisible dragon." He ran in the opposite direction.

#

Cassandra glanced over at the elven apostate. "I've wondered: How did you know to approach us, Solas? The Breach opened, we were scrambling and barely had time to think..." She raised an eyebrow. "And there you were."

He shrugged in response. "I went to see the Breach for myself. I did not know you would be there."

"You must not have been far away."

"I was not. I'd come to hear of the Conclave, but did not want to get close."

"Hmm. Lucky for us, then." She started to ask him another question, and shut her mouth again as a snowball splattered against the back of his head.

Solas blinked, and slowly turned around to see Kathan standing near the tents. The qunari man waved cheerfully. "The mages are ready," he called before turning to head back to whatever else he'd been doing.

"Yes." Solas wiped the snow off his collar. His fingers glowed momentarily, and Cassandra had to hide a laugh when the ground beneath the Herald suddenly turned to ice, sending the big man sliding down the short hill to land in a haystack. "Lucky indeed."

#

He focused on Solas's voice as they headed up to the Breach. The mages were going to focus their power, letting him draw from them. By the time they reached the ruins, he was at least semi-confident he understood how it worked. And knew what he was supposed to do.

The mark glowed as they approached where the green energy trailed down out of the rift. It hung in the air, vaguely like smoke. Behind

him, he heard Solas instruct the mages. The mark itched. He walked towards the glow, and felt... something, rising behind him. He pictured a net, turning the mark to capture the energy, letting it swell and fill. It rose, became pain. He set himself, and released the energy all at once, as he had closed the other rifts.

It took him a moment to realize he'd fallen to one knee. Above, the breach seemed to start to explode outward, and then, abruptly, it collapsed and vanished, leaving only a faint glow in the sky. Cassandra was next to him, touching his shoulder. He smiled, and got to his feet. "You did it," she said.

He grinned, and picked her up in a hug. She punched him, but laughed.

#

Haven was celebrating. Over by the Chantry a bunch of kids were engaged in a snowball fight with two of the Inquisition's runners. The runners were losing rather badly, but they were heavily outnumbered. He was considering going to give them a hand when he saw Cassandra walking towards them.

"Solas confirms the heavens are scarred but calm. The Breach is sealed. We've reports of lingering rifts, and many questions remain, but this was a victory." She smiled. "Word of your heroism has spread."

"All I did was throw some green light at it." He gestured out at the celebrating crowd. "They did it. I'm just the lucky guy that got to stand in the middle when they did."

"A strange kind of luck. I'm not sure if we need more or less." Cassandra shrugged as she looked down at the celebrants. "But you're right. This was a victory of alliance. One of the few in recent memory. With the Breach closed, that alliance will need new focus."

Kathan was about to ask her if she wanted to go get a drink when the alarm started ringing. Cullen gave the order. "Forces approaching. To arms."

Cassandra and Kathan exchanged a look, and headed for the gate.

#

"Cullen?" Cassandra strode a couple paces ahead.

Cullen turned towards them. "One watch guard reporting. It's a massive force, the bulk over the mountain."

"Under what banner?" Josephine turned towards him in confusion.

"None."

Something banged against the gate. Kathan gestured at Cullen, and the two of them walked forward, weapons in hand. "I can't come in unless you open." The voice on the other side sounded young.

They pushed the gates open just in time to see a young man in a terrible hat fell the last of a group of venatori warriors. The young man stepped towards them. "I'm Cole. I came to warn you. To help." He gestured emphatically. "People are coming to hurt you. You probably already know."

"What people?" Kathan asked.

"The templars come to kill you," Cole said. He turned and pointed back towards the mountain.

"Templars?" Cullen managed to sound both dubious and angry at the same time. "Is this the Order's response to our talks with the mages? Attacking blindly?"

"The red templars went to the Elder One." Cole moved forward, motions jerky as if his limbs weren't quite attached properly. "You know him? He knows you. You took his mages." He pointed. "There."

That... looked like a darkspawn. A really, really big darkspawn, standing next to a guy in glowing red armor. Cullen stepped forward, confusion on his face. "I know that man..." He shook his head. "But this Elder One..."

"He's very angry that you took his mages." Cole had a wonderful knack for stating the obvious.

"Cullen." Kathan glanced down at the man next to him. "Don't suppose you've got a plan?"

Cullen hesitated, and then nodded. "Haven is no fortress. If we are to withstand this monster, we must control the battle. Get out there and hit that force. Use everything you can."

"Good thing we got the trebuchets finished." Kathan drew his daggers and gestured towards some of the folks gathered at the gate. Cassandra, Vivienne, and Iron Bull moved to join him.

"Mages. You-" Cullen drew his blade and began rallying the rest of their forces. "You have sanction to engage them. That is Samson. He will not make it easy. Inquisition. With the Herald. For your lives. For all of us."

#

Kathan and Cassandra moved through the attackers back to back. Behind them, Iron Bull used his massive axe to sweep the survivors out of Vivienne's path as the mage directed her spells. They cleared the trebuchet as the soldiers began loading it and working the mechanism. Kathan sent a dagger flying into the leg of one of the approaching soldiers, then moved the flank the monstrosity attacking Cassandra. Shit, if they kept coming this fast, he was going to run out of knives. More soldiers joined them as the trebuchet fired.

The other trebuchet was still. He headed in that direction, joined by his friends. Vivienne announced their arrival with a blast of lightning, and he charged in next to Cassandra. They moved together, her shield taking the brunt of attacks while he slid in, his daggers finding chinks in enemy armor. A last attacker raised his blade, only

to be frozen into a chunk of ice that was shattered a moment later by a blow from Iron Bull. Kathan went to the trebuchet and began working the mechanism. He hit the release, and watched the ammunition soar into the side of the mountain. It hit. He held his breath. One heartbeat, two, five, and the mountain began to slide. He heard Vivienne laugh behind him, and turned towards her for a smile. His eyes widened, and he grabbed her, throwing them both clear just as the dragon's breath came for the trebuchet.

He landed with a grunt and a mage on top of him. Her barrier sprang into place just in time to protect them both from the resulting shrapnel. "Shit."

"Yes, darling."

Kathan picked them both up as Cassandra rushed over. "We can't face it here. We have to..." She stared up at the sky, her face shocked. "Do something."

"Everyone to the gates."

#

He and Cullen pushed the gates shut as the last of the soldiers came through. At least, he hoped it was the last of them. Harrit followed the rest of the soldiers up the stairs. Cullen began calling orders. "We need everyone back to the Chantry. It's the only building that might hold against..." He shook his head. "That beast. At this point..." He nodded to Kathan. "Just make them work for it."

Kathan returned the nod. He started to head in, and saw Lysette blocked by red templars. He switched direction, and went to help her out. Lysette. Flissa. Adan and Minaeve. Threnn. He almost missed the sound of Seggrit's voice, but Vivienne caught his attention and pointed with her staff. He trusted to her barrier magic, and used his shoulder to bust down the door to the flaming building. One hand grabbed the man and yanked him free of the debris, and then they were moving again.

Roderick was at the door, standing by Cole. A single look at the man told Kathan it was bad. Chantry robes weren't supposed to be that shade of red. "Move. Keep going. The Chantry is your shelter."

One last look over his shoulder saw no more of Haven's people. He closed the door. Cole carried Roderick deeper into the chantry. "He tried to stop a templar. The blade went deep. He's going to die."

"What a charming boy." Roderick almost managed a smile. Kathan caught his other side, and helped Cole get him to a chair.

"Herald." Cullen walked towards them. "Our position is not good. That dragon stole back any time you might have earned us."

"I've seen an Archdemon." Cole's voice was strange. "I was in the Fade, but it looked like that."

"I don't care what it looks like." Cullen shook his head. "It has cut a path for that army. They'll kill everyone in Haven."



"The Elder One doesn't care about the village. He only wants the Herald." Cole tilted his head up.

Now really didn't seem the time to point out he wasn't a herald of anything. "I don't care what he wants. How do I stop him?"

"It won't be easy. He has a dragon."

Both Cullen and Kathan stared at Cole for a moment. Cullen shook his head. "We know what he..." Cullen turned to look back up at Kathan. "Herald, there are no tactics to make this survivable. The only thing that slowed them was the avalanche. We could turn the remaining trebuchets, cause one last slide."

His eyes went past Cullen, to where the people were huddling. "We're overrun. To hit the enemy, we'd bury Haven."

Cullen's face showed he knew that as well as Kathan did. "We're dying, but we can decide how. Many don't get that choice."

He was searching for another plan when he heard Cole speak again. "Yes, that. Chancellor Roderick can help. He wants to say it before he dies."

"There is a path. You wouldn't know it unless you'd made the summer pilgrimage. As I have. The people can escape. She must have shown me. Andraste must have shown me so I could..." He coughed, blood on his lips. "Tell you."

Kathan crouched beside the man to look at him eye level. "Roderick?"

"It was whim I walked the path. I did not mean to start. It was overgrown. Now, with so many in the Conclave dead, to be the only one who remembers..." Roderick stared at him, eyes bright. "I don't know, Herald. If this simple memory can save us, this could be more than mere accident. You could be more."

He stared into the man's eyes, and nodded before standing. It would take time to get the people out. And if time was what they needed... "If that thing is here for me, I'll make him fight for it."

"And when the mountain falls? What about you?" Cullen asked. Kathan gave him a shrug and a smile. "Perhaps you will surprise it, find a way..." Cullen shook his head, and then his voice became military precise once more. "Inquisition. Follow Chancellor Roderick through the Chantry. Move."

He draped Roderick over Cole. "Herald..." Roderick looked at him once more. "If you are meant for this, if the Inquisition is meant for this, I pray for you."

Now wasn't the time for prayers. Now was the time for knives. He checked his, grabbed two more from a table. Cullen strode back towards him. "Keep the Elder One's attention until we're above the tree line. If we are to have a chance - if you are to have a chance - let that thing hear you."

"Get moving, Commander," Kathan replied as he headed for the door. Vivienne, Iron Bull, and Cassandra walked out with him. Four against

an army. Well. This should be fun.

#

He'd give Vivienne credit where it was due. Silky could put on one hell of a show. Spells erupted as they moved forward, sowing disarray into the enemy forces for the blades of the warriors. Kathan kicked a templar in the stomach, knocking the man... creature... thing... off balance enough that Cassandra could strike him down with a back-handed blow.

More surrounded the trebuchet. No sooner had they cleared the first group and started turning the trebuchet than more poured from the trees. The last wave had a brute, a moving mountain of red lyrium. He flanked it, keeping it between himself and Cassandra as they drove in, attacking whenever they saw an opening.

It fell, and he ran to the trebuchet. The mechanism clicked into place and... He picked Cassandra up and threw her to Iron Bull as the dragon came again. "Go." He headed for the firing lever, and the dragon's breath hit, sending him flying.

#

He rolled back to his feet and started for the trebuchet again. The dragon landed, roaring. Kathan set himself, trying to figure out his odds of getting past. It circled, lowering its head, and roared again. Wonderful. Something that could swallow him whole. He drew his knives. Not without choking.

Something was coming through the flames. "Enough." The dragon stepped back at the thing's words. That was not comforting. "Pretender. You toy with forces beyond your ken. No more."

"You don't scare me, whatever you are." What was he? He looked... Kathan had only seen a few darkspawn, but this thing... It was huge.

"Words mortals often hurl at the darkness. Once they were mine. They are always lies." The darkspawn came closer. "Know me. Know what you have pretended to be. Exalt the Elder One. The will that is Corypheus. You will kneel."

"Doubt it." He adjusted his grip on his blades.

"You will resist. You will always resist. It matters not." It drew an orb from within its tattered robes. "I am here for the Anchor. The process of removing it begins now." The orb glowed, and his hand caught fire. He staggered. "It is your fault, 'Herald.' You interrupted a ritual years in the planning, and instead of dying, you stole its purpose." The glowing green energy burned and pulled at him in response to whatever the darkspawn thing was doing. "I do not know how you survived, but what marks you as 'touched,' what you flail at rifts, I crafted to assault the very heavens." Something yanked him forwards a step, and he fell. Behind him, he heard a crunch of ice and rock as the dragon moved towards him. "And you used the Anchor to undo my work. The gall."

Focus. Something. Anything. Keep it talking. Time. They still needed time. "What is this thing meant to do?"

"It is meant to bring certainty where there is none. For you, the certainty that I would always come for it." The creature strode forward, grabbed his wrist, and yanked him into the air. His feet dangled a couple feet off the ground. "I once breached the Fade in the name of another, to serve the Old Gods of the empire in person. I found only chaos and corruption. For a thousand years I was confused. No more. I have gathered the will to return under no name but my own, to champion withered Tevinter and correct this blighted world. Beg that I succeed, for I have seen the throne of the gods, and it was empty." Kathan grunted as he was flung into the air and into the trebuchet. This was not doing good things for what little dignity he had. "The Anchor is permanent. You have spoiled it with your stumbling."

A blade. He grabbed it. The creature came towards him, still talking. "So be it. I will begin again, find another way to give this world the nation - and god - it requires." A chance. One chance. "And you. I will not suffer even an unknowing rival. You must die."

That made two of them and... an arrow. A fire arrow. Roderick and Cullen had done it. He smiled. "You expect me to fight, but that's not why I kept you talking." He pointed the sword at the thing. "Enjoy your victory. Here's your prize." He kicked the lever. And because standing there while an avalanche headed in his direction seemed a dumb thing to do, he ran for the mine.

#

His feet went out from under him, and he fell, tumbling into the hole and into the tunnel as snow caved it in behind him. He lay there, trying to catch his breath. From the sharp ache every time he inhaled, he'd broken at least one rib. Probably more. He touched his side, and felt a rib move in response. Not good. His shoulder burned, as did his back where he'd hit the trebuchet.

Where his stuff had been was now covered with ice and snow, but a quick look through Shiny's section of the mine netted him a dagger. At least he wasn't completely unarmed. The kitten peeked out from behind a rock and meowed at him. He nodded to her. "Ya know, if'n I've been in a worse situation, it ain't coming to mind." The kitten meowed again. He picked her up and tucked her into his vest. There was only one direction. He walked in it.

#

Demons. He went for his daggers before remembering he only had the one. Disrupt the rift until... he raised his hand, focusing the power out, but there was no rift to disrupt. He changed it like the net, and something happened. The demons went away. He stared down at the marked hand. Shiny'd know. Assuming he was alive.

Daylight. Or something like it.

#

Snow swirled, leeching the heat from his bones. His skin burned where metal touched. The only warm spot was where the kitten was shivering against him. If he didn't find shelter, he'd die. If he returned to the shelter he'd left, he'd die. Light. Distant. Ahead. Fire. A wolf

howled.

#

Bodies in the snow, frozen and dead. Red and dead. How many? Fire back at Haven. The dragon. Soldiers, and not just soldiers. Men and women with tools, trying to stand against a beast. A small body on the ground in a pool of red. Anger was hot, burning. Keep it going. Push. Can't let that thing win. The wolf howled again. He threw his head back and howled in response, and kept moving.

#

A camp. Firepit cool, but not covered in snow. Keep walking. Cullen's voice? Cassandra. He heard her thank the Maker and saw her rush towards him as he collapsed. He'd never seen anything quite so beautiful in his life.

## 5. Chapter 5

He woke to the sound of arguments. Cullen, Leliana, Josephine, and Cassandra. Beneath their voices was fear. Breathing didn't hurt. Someone had patched his ribs. He sat up gingerly. A hand offered him a steaming mug, and he turned to see Mother Giselle. She smiled at him. "Shh, you need rest."

"They still arguing?"

"They have that luxury, thanks to you. The enemy could not follow, and with time to doubt, we turn to blame." She folded her hands in her lap. "Infighting may threaten as much as this Corypheus."

"They keep yelling like that, they are going to bring another mountain down." He sat up.

"They know. But our situation - your situation - is complicated." Mother Giselle gave him a contemplative look. "Our leaders struggle because of what we survivors witnessed. We saw our defender stand..." Her eyes met his. "And fall. And now, we have seen him return. The more the enemy is beyond us, the more miraculous your actions appear. And the more our trials seem ordained." She gave him a knowing smile. "That is hard to accept, no? What 'we' have been called to endure? What 'we,' perhaps, must come to believe?"

He'd half-fallen down a mineshaft and stumbled through snow drifts. They called that miraculous? Maybe if he'd flown into camp on a griffin it would make some sense. "I escaped the avalanche. Barely, perhaps, but I didn't die."

"Of course, and the dead cannot return from across the Veil. But the people know what they saw." She touched his arm gently. "Or, perhaps, what they needed to see. The Maker works both in the moment, and in how it is remembered. Can we truly know the heavens are not with us?"

Kathan sighed. He'd heard the Chant a bunch of times. Read it a few more. If he decided to believe that far, then... "You saw Corypheus. What do you think of his claims of assaulting the heavens?"

"Scripture says magisters, Tevinter servants of the false Old Gods, entered the Fade to reach the Golden City, seat of the Maker. For their crime, they were cast out as darkspawn. Their hubris is why we suffer the Blight, and why the Maker turned from us. If such is the claim of this Corypheus, he is a monster beyond imagining. All mankind continues to suffer for that sin. If even a shred of it is true, all the more reason Andraste would choose someone to rise against him."

Easy answers. Too easy. It would be nice to have a wall to bang his head against right now. "Corypheus said he found only corruption and emptiness. Nothing golden."

"If he entered that place, it has changed him without and within. The living are not meant to make that journey. Perhaps these are lies he must tell himself, rather than accept that he earned the scorn of the Maker. I know I could not bear such."

Sitting here talking about faith wasn't going to solve any problems. Could have a hundred voices singing prayers, and the roof wasn't going to get fixed until someone climbed up there with a hammer. "If the enemy is still out there, these questions don't matter. We need soldiers, weapons. Corypheus doesn't care what we believe." He stood, and stepped out of the tent into the colder air, letting the chill clear his head.

#

Mother Giselle started to sing. A Chantry hymn. He thought he'd heard it before. Leliana was the first to join in. Then others did. They started walking towards him. Even Cullen added his voice. People were... kneeling. Looking at him, hands folded, and kneeling. They... He should have let the dragon eat him.

The song faded away. Mother Giselle looked up at him. "Corypheus will care. The best answer to powerful lies are certain truths." She walked away, moving among the faithful bunch of lunatics that... Shit.

"A word?" He was almost relieved to hear Solas's voice. Hopefully the guy had a good distraction. Maybe another dragon.

#

Kathan followed Solas out of the camp. The mage lit a torch with veilfire, giving them some light. "A wise woman, worth heeding. Her kind understand the moments that unify a cause. Or fracture it." Solas clasped his hands behind his back. "The orb Corypheus carried, the power he used against you. It is elven. Corypheus used the orb to open the Breach. Unlocking it must have caused the explosion that destroyed the Conclave. I do not yet know how Corypheus survived..." Solas looked up at him. "Nor am I certain how people will react when they learn of the orb's origin."

"Probably purge something. Jackasses." Kathan folded his arms. "What and how do you know about it?"

"They were foci, used to channel ancient magicks. I have seen such things in the Fade, old memories of older magic. Corypheus may think

it Tevinter. His empire's magic was built on the bones of my people. Knowing or not, he risks our alliance. I cannot allow it."

He rubbed at the base of one of his horns, and looked back at the camp. Solas was leaving something out, but right now it didn't matter much. He had a feeling it was going to matter soon though. "Last fucking thing we need is folks deciding this is the fault of the elves."

"History would agree. But there are steps we can take to prevent such a distraction."

"I'm listening."

#

They walked ahead of the others. Once Solas told him what to look for, the ancient trail markers weren't hard to find. "Shouldn't it be you?" Kathan glanced at him. "I mean, if we are trying to prove elves are the good guys?"

"Faith in you is shaping this moment."

He was pretty sure this was only going to make that particular problem worse. And he was also pretty sure that was Solas's intention. "If they start singing at me again, I'm kicking your ass." Kathan gave him a mock glare. "Just as long as we are clear." He sighed. "Every time I look back there's more of them."

Solas gestured to a rise. Kathan climbed it and got his first glimpse of what lay in the valley. The fort was old, but he could tell even from here that the bones were strong. It's position... He'd hate to have to lay siege to that place. No good spots for trebuchets, and anyone with a ram would have to... He glanced over at Solas. Solas gestured at the place. "Skyhold."

Kathan smiled in response, and started walking towards it.

#

The young girl who'd brought the breakfast tray to him scampered back out, the kitten on her shoulder. He followed her, and sighed. Well, that had the look of a lovely conspiracy brewing. Kathan narrowed his eyes when he saw the Inquisition's leadership gathered together and not arguing. He started to walk over. All but Cassandra scattered. "They arrive daily from every settlement in the region. Skyhold is becoming a pilgrimage." She nodded to the people in the courtyard, and gestured for him to walk with her. "If word has reached these people, it will have reached the Elder One. We have the walls and numbers to put up a fight here, but this threat is far beyond the war we anticipated. But we now know what allowed you to stand against Corypheus, what drew him to you."

He looked down at his hand, and gave her a suspicious look. "This isn't more about me being divinely touched, is it?"

"I won't ask you to believe. Whether it's true or not, that's not why you're here now. Your decisions let us heal the sky. Your determination brought us out of Haven." She began walking up the stairs. "You are that creature's rival because of what you did. And

we know it. All of us." She led him to where Leliana was standing. Where Leliana was standing holding a ceremonial looking sword. "The Inquisition requires a leader: the one who has already been leading it." There were a lot of people gathered below. Cullen and Josephine among them. Cassandra stared up at him. "You."

"Are you insane? They expect a savior, someone with divine power." He wanted to shout, but kept his voice at a low hiss.

"They want you."

"Because they think I'm chosen."

"They believe you are chosen because of what you have done. What you have inspired. In all of us. Without you, there would be no Inquisition. Where you lead us, what kind of leader you are..." Cassandra gestured to the sword. "That is up to you."

Oh he was so going to kick Shiny's ass for this. The elven man had played them like a drum. He closed his hand around the hilt of the blade, and lifted it from Leliana's hand. No other choice remained. And they were probably expecting a speech. Shit. "I will lead us against Corypheus, and I will be an ambassador. I'm a Qunari standing for Thedas. The Inquisition is for all."

"Wherever you lead us." Cassandra raised her voice. "Have our people been told?"

Josephine answered. "They have. And soon the world."

"Commander, will they follow?"

Cullen turned towards the crowd. "Inquisition. Will you follow?" Cheers greeted his words as he lifted his hands. "Will you fight?" The cheering got louder. "Will we triumph?" They managed to get even louder. Cullen drew his sword, and turned to point it at Kathan. "Your leader. Your Herald. Your Inquisitor."

Kathan raised the ceremonial sword in response. Maybe now he'd get paid for this shit. Eh. Probably not.

#

The wood in the place was probably a loss. But the stone was good. Solid bones. Kathan stepped over some of the debris on the floor. Cullen looked around. "So this is where it begins."

"It began in the courtyard." Leliana examined a fallen chandelier. "This is where we turn that promise into action."

"But what do we do?" Josephine waved her pen. "We know nothing about this Corypheus except that he wanted your mark?"

Information was what they needed first. "Someone out there must know something about Corypheus."

"Unless they saw him on the field, most will not believe he even exists." Cullen shook his head.

"We do have one advantage: we know what Corypheus intends to do

next." Leliana turned to face them. "In that strange future you experienced, Empress Celene had been assassinated."

"Imagine the chaos her death would cause. With his army..." Josephine swallowed.

"An army he'll bolster with a massive force of demons, or so the future tells us," Cullen rested his hands on his sword hilt.

"Corypheus could conquer the entire south of Thedas, god or no god." Josephine sounded fearful

Leliana folded her arms. "I'd feel better if we knew more about what we were dealing with."

"I know someone who can help with that." Varric entered the room behind them. "Everyone acting all inspirational jogged my memory, so I sent a message to an old friend. He crossed paths with Corypheus before, and may know more about what he's doing. He can help."

That was... ah. Shit. Cassandra was going to kill Varric. "Introduce us."

"Parading around might cause a fuss. It's better for you to meet privately. On the battlements." Varric shrugged. "Trust me. It's complicated." He left the hall. Hopefully to find armor, and some healing potions. Because Cassandra was going to kill him.

"Well, then." Josephine adjusted her writing board. "We stand ready to move on both of these concerns."

"On your order, Inquisitor." Cullen rested his hand on his sword hilt again.

Leliana's thoughts apparently mirrored his own. "I know one thing: If Varric has brought who I think he has, Cassandra is going to kill him."

#

He checked on his companions first. Vivienne actually fussed over him. For a moment, he was worried she was going to do the 'wash his face with spit' thing. Sera was having a freakout over the end of the world darkspawn dragon thing. Not that it wasn't perfectly understandable to have freakouts over end of the world darkspawn dragon things. At least she realized how stupid the whole mess was. And they'd put him in charge of it. Maniacs.

Blackwall walked with him to check the walls. "We'll be able to see Corypheus coming from miles away."

Kathan nodded, looking out over the view. A good defensible position, and several choke points. Room for tents, horses, even some tillable land, if he was any judge. They could hold this valley against an army twice their size. "We know he's coming now. Won't take us by surprise this time."

"We lost good soldiers that day..." Blackwall shook his head. "Loyal men and women. Let him come. I swear I'll take the twisted bastard



down, even if I have to die to do it."

"Know that feeling." Kathan took a deep breath. "Glad to have you along for the ride."

"It's my job, isn't it? Killing darkspawn?" Blackwall shrugged. "Look, in spite of it all, there is hope. The people flock to your banner. They believe in you." He started to walk away, then turned back. "Tell me honestly: are you what they say you are? Andraste's chosen?"

The man had been following him around for weeks. Surely he knew the answer to that by now. "I wish they'd understand that I'm really a nobody."

Blackwall shook his head. "You're somebody. Don't you see what you are to them? Without you, they'd be consumed by despair. We all would. They need you to be Andraste's messenger. It gives them hope. The truth doesn't matter." He shrugged. "Ah, listen to me talk. Your time is valuable, and I've wasted enough of it." Blackwall headed back for the stairs.

Kathan remained where he was, staring out across the valley. He could see more coming. And clouds on the horizon. The truth did matter. At least it should. Herald. And that 'your worship' thing had caught on. And now Inquisitor. Maybe some higher power was jerking him around. He turned, and looked back at the castle. His castle. His people. His responsibility. They believed in him.

Which meant he couldn't fuck this up.

And he still wasn't getting paid.

#

Cullen was leaning on a makeshift desk, calling orders to his subordinates. He turned and looked up with Kathan approached. "We set up as best we could at Haven, but could never prepare for an Archdemon - or whatever it was. With some warning, we might have..."

"Do you ever sleep?" Kathan tilted his head at the guy who was apparently now his general.

"If Corypheus strikes again, we may not be able to withdraw..." Cullen glanced towards the infirmary. "And I wouldn't want to. We must be ready."

"Which means you need to get some sleep."

"Work on Skyhold is underway, guard rotations established. We should have everything on course within the week." Cullen turned back towards him. "We will not run from here, Inquisitor."

Kathan sighed. "We lost people."

"Most of our people made it to Skyhold. It could have been worse." He rested his hands on his sword hilt. "Morale was low, but has improved greatly since you accepted the role of Inquisitor."

The man before him had been one of the ones who'd sung. "Inquisitor Adaar." He shook his head. "It sounds odd, don't you think?"

"Not at all."

"That your official stance?"

Cullen actually laughed. "I suppose it is. But it's the truth." He looked up at Kathan. "We needed a leader; you have proven yourself."

"Skyhold seems as good a place as any for a fresh start."

"Once repairs are complete, it will be a strong base of operation. I will do everything I can to ensure the security of our people. You have my word."

"Everything you can." Kathan nodded to him. "Which means get yourself some sleep." He shrugged. "Maybe find yourself a wench and get laid." He walked away, leaving a stammering general behind him.

#

Cassandra was talking to Silky and Shiny. Or maybe refereeing was a better term. He wandered over. Cole, the kid who'd come to warn them, was apparently the subject matter. Silky sounded pretty annoyed. "This thing is not a stray puppy you can make into a pet. It has no business being here." Kathan felt the muscles in his neck tense. Cole wasn't an 'it'.

"Wouldn't you say the same of an apostate?" Solas stared back at Vivienne calmly.

"Inquisitor, I was wondering if Cole was perhaps a mage, given his unusual abilities." Cassandra nodded when she saw him.

"He can cause people to forget him, or even fail entirely to notice him." Solas turned to look at Kathan. "These are not the abilities of a mage. It seems that Cole is a spirit."

"It is a demon." Vivienne's voice was blunt, and she was glaring at Solas.

Solas merely shrugged in response. "If you prefer, although the truth is somewhat more complex."

Kathan blinked. "How complex are we talking? Cause things are pretty complex already."

"Indeed, my dear." Vivienne folded her arms. "He may call it whatever he likes, but it is still a threat."

"In fact, his nature is not so easily defined."

Frustration showed on Cassandra's face. "Speak plainly, Solas. What are we dealing with?"

"Demons normally enter this world by possessing something." Solas moved his hands as he spoke. "In their true form, they look bizarre,

monstrous."

"But you claim Cole looks like a young man." Cassandra shook her head. "Is it possession?"

"No." Solas shook his head in turn. "He has possessed nothing and no one, and yet he appears human in all respects." He turned towards Kathan. "Cole is unique, Inquisitor. More than that, he wishes to help. I suggest you allow him to do so."

"So..." Kathan raised an eyebrow. "Did somebody summon him or bind him or what?"

"It seems Cole has willfully manifested in human form without possessing anyone."

Kathan nodded slowly. "Like the ones that came through the Breach?"

"Those demons were drawn through against their will, driven mad by this world. But Cole predates the Breach. From what we can tell, he has lived here for months, perhaps years. He looks like a young man. For all intents and purposes, he is a young man. It is remarkable."

"I..." Kathan shrugged. "You can try to explain later. I'll talk to the guy, see what he's got to say." He turned around, and blinked. "Where'd he go?"

"If none of us remember him, he could be anywhere..." Cassandra scanned the courtyard.

Solas gestured towards the makeshift infirmary. Kathan nodded, and headed that way.

#

"Haven. So many soldiers fought to protect the pilgrims so they could escape." Cole stood among the wounded and dying. "Choking fear, can't think from the medicine but the cuts wrack me with every heartbeat. Hot white pain, everything burns. I can't, I can't, I'm going to... I'm dying, I'm..." A soldier breathed his last. "...dead."

Too many. Some burned. Some cut. A few ill from the bite of the cold. "Are you..." Kathan tilted his head. "Feeling their pain?"

"It's louder this close, with so many of them."

"Would you..." Kathan glanced at the wounded. "You want to go somewhere more comfortable?"

"Yes. But here is where I can help." He moved to stand next to another soldier. "Every breath slower. Like lying in a warm bath. Sliding away. Smell of my daughter's hair when I kiss her goodnight. Gone." Something appeared to catch the guy's attention. "Cracked brown pain, dry, scraping. Thirsty." He filled a cup with water, and brought it to another of the wounded. "Here." He looked up. "It's all right. She won't remember me."

"Solas tried to..." Kathan glanced back over his shoulder, then

shrugged. "Well, he tried to explain but I only understand about half of what he says most of the time. Can you tell me what you are?"

"Yes. I used to think I was a ghost. I didn't know. I made mistakes..." He looked up at Kathan from under a broad-brimmed hat. "But I made friends, too. Then a templar proved I wasn't real. I lost my friends. I lost everything. I learned to be more like what I am. It made me different, but stronger. I can feel more. I can help."

He'd seen the dead Venatori. There was no doubt this pup had fangs, and he could hear Kas yelling about taking in strays. Guy wanted to help. Help was something they needed. And might be best to keep this pup from wandering loose. "Willing help is always appreciated."

Cole actually smiled. "Yes, helping. I help the hurt, the helpless, there's someone..." He turned to another soldier. "Hurts. It hurts, it hurts, someone make it stop hurting, Maker please..." And the pup bared his teeth. "The healers have done all they can. It will take him hours to die. Every moment will be agony. He wants mercy. Help."

Kathan went to the man's side, touched his hand. The man looked up at him, eyes wide. They had mages. Somebody could help. He stood between the soldier and Cole. "You can't be sure."

"His body is failing."

"His heart is still beating. So there is hope."

"How do you know?" Cole's pale blue eyes met her darker blue.

"Nobody knows. Not til it's done. Even then."

Slowly, Cole nodded, and then spoke to the wounded soldier. "Try." He turned his eyes back to Kathan. "I want to stay."

#

"No, like this." Kathan scooped up another handful of snow. "You don't want it too firm, or it won't splatter properly." He packed the wet snow into a ball and handed it to the boy. The boy nodded before turning and hurling it at Sera. Sera shook her head, then bent and started packing a snowball of her own. Kathan looked down at the boy. "This is the part where you run."

The boy nodded, and took off like an arrow. Sera went dashing off after him, and a moment later Kathan heard her yelp as the rest of the kids made good on the ambush. He bent and began packing snowballs for the inevitable retaliation. He set one on the pile and started forming another before stopping and staring at it, turning it this way and that in his hand. Then he looked up at Skyhold. Shiny'd been with the refugees, and even then nobody but him had really been close enough to see what had... He looked down at the snowball again. So how had Solas known it was an orb?

He was about to head up to the castle when a snowball hit him in the arm. Kathan laughed, and began flinging his own snowballs back at the

oncoming army of short people.

#

Josephine shook her head and smiled. Kathan was standing just inside the great hall, a little girl of no more than seven standing on his shoulders with a hammer in her hand, hanging a banner. The girl's tongue was sticking out of the side of her mouth as she concentrated on placing the nail just right. "We have ladders."

"They are using those by the barn." He let the girl finish the task, then caught her and set her back on the ground. "Go play." He watched her go, then shrugged. "Her folks didn't make it out of Haven."

"So you put her to work?" Josephine smiled.

"Silky wanted the banners hung. She was on about keeping up appearances and..." He shrugged and rubbed his horn awkwardly. "Well, there might have been more to it. I kinda stopped listening."

He was still wearing that... thing. "Inquisitor, I had appropriate clothing placed in your room."

"Really?" Kathan shook his head. "Cause all I found was fancy shit with way too many buttons."

"You may argue about being the Herald, but you accepted the role of Inquisitor." She looked up at him.

"I..." He blinked. "You're going to pull the 'rights and responsibilities card', ain't you?"

"And being the Inquisitor carries with it both certain rights, and certain responsibilities. You represent all of us, and our hopes and goals. You are the embodiment of..."

"Ruffles, of all my nemesis-es, I think you're the scariest."

#

"Brilliant, isn't it?" Dorian was reordering some of the books, and apparently rejecting others. "One moment you're trying to restore order in a world gone mad. That should be enough for anyone to handle, yes? Then, out of nowhere, an Archdemon appears and kicks you in the head. 'What? You thought this would be easy?' 'No, I was just hoping you wouldn't crush our village like an anthill.' 'Sorry about that! Archdemons like to crush, you know. Can't be helped.'" He turned, and looked up at Kathan. "Am I speaking too quickly for you?"

"I kind of imagined the archdemon with an oddly squeaky voice." Kathan shrugged. "And a droopy mustache. Oh, and one of those ugly hats like some of the Fereldan mages wear."

Dorian stared at him. "It is possible you have given this too much thought." He shook his head. "I always assumed the 'Elder One' behind the Venatori was a magister, but this..." He tossed the book he was holding onto a chair. "Is something else entirely. In Tevinter, they say the Chantry's tales of magisters starting the Blight are just

that: tales. But here we are. One of those very magisters. A darkspawn."

"You're taking it a bit personal." Kathan leaned on the bookshelf. "Any reason why?"

"Because the Imperium is my home. I knew what I was taught couldn't be the whole truth, but I assumed there had to be a kernel of it. Somewhere." Dorian mirrored his stance on the adjacent bookshelf. "But no. It was us all along. We destroyed the world."

"Nah. Some ancient bastards did. Maybe there's some stupid enough to pull the same shit, but there's also ones like you and Felix."

"No one will thank me, whatever happens." Dorian shook his head. "No one will thank you, either. You know that, yes?"

"Ain't why I'm here."

"I knew there was something clever about you." Dorian smiled. "All I know is this: Corypheus needs to be stopped. Men like him ruined my homeland. I won't stand by and let him ruin the world." He looked down at the stack of books, and then back at Kathan. "Oh, and congratulations on that whole leading-the-Inquisition thing, by the way."

Kathan nodded. He started to walk away, and then turned. "Hey, Sparkly."

"Hmm?" Dorian looked back at him.

"Thank you."

#

He paced the room a few times, looking at the armor someone had laid out on the bed. It was ornate and scaly and kind of dragon-y. And he'd feel ridiculous wearing it. Josephine had instructed two of the runners to dispose of his old cloths, but fortunately a couple of the kids had retrieved them for him. He'd paid them each a gold for the help.

With a sigh, he 'accidentally' dropped the armor off the balcony and down into the valley below. "Oops." He looked down. "Tragic." He shrugged, and headed for the stairs.

#

"Hey Shiny." He walked into the round room. Solas was examining where he'd started adding a mural to the wall. "I had some more questions, about the Fade thing. If'n you've got time."

Solas gave him an odd look. "You continue to surprise me. All right, let us talk..." He gestured. "Preferably somewhere more interesting than this."

#

Haven was... It was Haven. Like he'd first seen it. Only no people. It couldn't be... Oh. He glanced down at Solas. "Why here?"

"Haven is familiar. It will always be important to you."

"Suppose you're right about that." They were in the room where he'd been briefly a prisoner. Except they hadn't walked there. They were just there. And he hadn't done it. He'd been thinking about the camp he'd shared with the other mercenaries. If this wasn't his dream, then...

"I sat beside you while you slept, studying the Anchor." Solas was looking at the room.

Kathan looked down at his hand. "And keepin it from killin me, or so Varric claimed."

"You were a mystery." Solas nodded. "You still are." He looked up at Kathan. "I ran every test I could imagine, searched the Fade, yet found nothing. Cassandra suspected duplicity. She threatened to have me executed as an apostate if I didn't produce results."

"Yeah. She does that. Part of her charm."

"Yes." Solas chuckled.

They were in the village square. He thought about the part of the ruins where he'd used to meet Chipmunk, but it failed to appear around him. Solas continued speaking. "You were never going to wake up. How could you, a mortal sent physically through the Fade?" Solas shook his head. "I was frustrated, frightened. The spirits I might have consulted had been driven away by the Breach. Although I wished to help, I had no faith in Cassandra..." He stopped at the rise that let him look over most of what had been the camp. "Or she in me. I was ready to flee."

"Where were you gonna go? The Breach was kind of big."

"Someplace far away where I might research a way to repair the Breach before its effects reached me." He shrugged "I never said it was a good plan." He looked up at where the Breach was once more in the sky. "I told myself: one more attempt to seal the rifts." He gestured. "I tried and failed. No ordinary magic would affect them. I watched the rifts expand and grow, resigned myself to flee, and then..."

They were back on the mountain, and he was sealing that first rift again. Kathan stared down at his hand one more.

"It seems you hold the key to our salvation. You had sealed it with a gesture..." Solas nodded. "And right then, I felt the whole world change."

Slowly, Kathan nodded. That made some kind of sense, didn't it? Curiosity. "Well, glad you decided to stick around."

"As am I." Solas smiled. "You have fractured rules of man and nature, and you will shatter more before you are done. To visit me here, and you not even a mage..."

It was the Fade then. And he'd somehow managed to come knocking on Solas's door. "So is this real or not?" Kathan gestured at

Haven.

"That's a matter of debate..." Solas gave him a small bow. "Probably best discussed after you wake up."

#

Kathan sat on the side of the bed, staring at the stained glass window. He took a deep breath, and then rose, going to the desk. From the top drawer, he removed the journal he'd started a few days previously, and opened it. His handwriting scrawled haphazardly, lines jutting every which way from where he'd tried to link pieces together. He dipped the pen in ink, and flipped to a fresh section, adding the events of the dream before setting the pen back down. He put the journal away, and then stood and walked out to the balcony. The night air was cold, but the sky was clear, making even faint stars visible.

"Am I missing pieces?" He asked the sky. "Or am I tryin to put together the wrong puzzle?"

No answer came.

#

"I had this odd dream. With these very odd people." Kathan smiled when he walked into the rotunda.

Solas smiled. "I will take that as a compliment, given that you include yourself. Remember, you came looking for me."

"I was looking for some cake, but one of the ladies in the kitchen said you took the last piece." Kathan shook his head. "What the hell happened, Shiny?"

"I had no idea that the Anchor would allow you to dream with such focus. It is truly remarkable." Solas shrugged. "But I am reasonably certain we are awake now, and if you wish to discuss anything, I would enjoy talking."

"According to that 'Role of the Fade' book, spirits shape the fade, not mortals."

"I was wondering where that book went."

"Don't worry, I didn't dog-ear it." Kathan set the book back on the table. "So did you shape Haven, or did you have one of your friends do it?"

"Neither. I took us into memories."

"Our memories. Or at least, things we both remembered. Is that why it wasn't all dreamy-haze?"

"You catch on quickly." Solas looked through the pile of books, and handed Kathan a worn and old tome. "You may find this one more useful, should you wish a greater understanding of the nature of spirits."

"This gonna happen again?" Kathan raised an eyebrow. "Cause if it



does, I've got a great memory of this one cave. See, it had stalagmites or tites or kites or whatever they call those things, but someone had carved faces into them. Lots of faces. A really long time ago, because they were fading as the stalagmites grew and you know how long that takes. You could sniff around and find out who did it and why, right?"

"If the opportunity arises."

"So, the pup -"

"Pup?"

"Cole. Anything I should do to make sure he's..." Kathan frowned. "I don't know. I mean, from what you've said, I think that it's as much a matter of keeping him safe from us as it is us safe from him."

"I believe Cole may be a spirit of compassion. Letting him help is the best thing you could do for him."

"Well, that shouldn't be hard. Lots of folks needing help right now."

#

He found Cassandra in the war room, leaning over a map. Kathan walked to the other side and looked down at it. "Sending troops anywhere particular?"

"I'm trying to imagine what it will look like when we're done." She gestured at the map. "All of this once belonged to the Tevinter Imperium. Andraste changed that, as did the Blights. As for what will come next..." She straightened. "I cannot guess the Maker's plan."

"So make your own plans." He smiled at her.

"I know I want a world where people trust the Chantry and that trust is respected." She took a deep breath. "I want to respect tradition but not fear change. I want to right past wrongs but not avenge them. And I have no idea if my wanting these things makes any of them right."

"Sounds like things worth fighting for to me."

"Some would disagree. They would call it heresy."

"Well, they're dumb." Kathan shook his head. "Cause that ain't the ravings of a heretic."

"Perhaps not, but it takes precious little effort to paint even an act of compassion as damaging." She walked to the window, and looked out at the trees. "Tell me, what guides you?" She leaned on the wall. "You make decisions that shake the world, yet always seem so assured. I wish I had your confidence."

Kathan walked towards her. "If'n there's anything guiding me, it's you."

She laughed. "Oh, excellent: the blind leading the blind."

"I don't think you're blind."

"Clearly you haven't been paying attention?"

He caught her hand in his. "Haven't I?"

A faint hint of red crept into her cheeks. "When we first met, if someone told me I would be pleased to have you lead me, I would have throttled them. But I am." She smiled. "The Maker chose well."

He leaned on the windowframe. "I don't believe I was chosen, remember?"

"Oh, I'm well aware." She shook her head, and let go of his hand. "We still have a long road to travel, Inquisitor. Wherever it takes us, I'm glad you're here."

#

Varric let him know the contact had arrived. "Inquisitor, meet Hawke. The Champion of Kirkwall."

Kathan put a hand over his face, and then looked down at Varric. "Cassandra is going to kill you."

#

"You've already dropped half a mountain on the bastard." Hawke leaned on the ramparts. "I'm sure anything I can tell you pales in comparison."

"I dunno." Kathan leaned out next to him. "Ya did kind of save a city from a horde of rampaging Qunari."

"I don't see how that really applies..." Hawke shrugged. "Or is there a horde of rampaging Qunari I don't know about?"

"Well, there's me." Kathan shrugged. "And um..." He pointed down at where Iron Bull was standing near the tavren. "Him. We might qualify. How many do you need to be a horde, anyway?"

"So, then, what can I tell you?"

"Varric says you guys fought and killed this guy before. And well, I've heard the story. Seems ta me if'n you and Varric killed somebody, they really should be dead. A lot."

"The Grey Wardens were holding him, and he somehow used his connection to the darkspawn to influence them." Hawke turned to face him.

Varric nodded. "Corypheus got into their heads. Messed with their minds. Turned them against each other."

"If the Wardens have disappeared, they could have fallen under his control again."

"Demons falling out of the sky. Cults. Darkspawn. Ancient magisters. Time-magic. Vinty-Venatori. Mind control. Crazy Wardens. Templars."

Archdemony-dragon." Kathan rubbed at one of his horns. "And I ain't even getting paid for this shit."

"I didn't come this far just to give you bad news." Hawke shrugged. "I've got a friend in the Wardens. He was investigating something unrelated for me. His name is Loghain. The last time we spoke, he was worried about corruption in the Warden ranks. Since then, nothing."

"Yeah, if'n it's that red lyrium shit Varric's been worried about, it ain't unrelated. Fuck, one of the templars we fought was covered in a mountain of that crap." Kathan shook his head. "Not sure how it relates, but it ain't unrelated. Startin to think none of this is." He tilted his head. "Loghain. Fereldan?"

"Yes." Hawke took a deep breath. "That Loghain. My brother is a Grey Warden. They served at the Vigil together."

"Your brother, he part of this mess?" Kathan raised an eyebrow.

"The last information I have puts him in the Free Marches." Hawke sighed. "Though..."

"I got spies. I can have them do some spying shit for him." Kathan nodded. "Did Loghain disappear with the others?"

"No. He told me he'd be hiding in an old smuggler's cave near Crestwood."

"Appreciate the help." Kathan glanced at Varric. "Ya can put him on my tab."

"Wait..." Varric blinked. "You got Cabot to run you a tab? How?"

"Remember the part where I'm the ringmaster now?" Kathan pointed at the landing. "They gave me a big damn sword and everything." He sighed. "They sang at me, Varric."

"When you fell out of the sky..." Hawke raised an eyebrow. "Did you happen to land on your head?"

"No, they really did sing at him." Varric nodded. "Cullen's actually got a pretty good voice."

#

"Inquisitor, there are a few nobles arriving who wish to meet the Herald."

"I'll have Leliana send somebody to track him down."

"Inquisitor." Josephine narrowed her eyes. She took the box out from a drawer in her desk and set it on the table. She opened it to reveal the contents. "You will arrive at the meeting. You will wear a appropriate clothing. You will be polite." She put the lid back on the box and put it back in her desk.

"You fight dirty, Ruffles." He glared at her.

She met it with a glare of her own. "On time. Dressed appropriately. Polite. I will remove one for every smart remark you make."

"Doesn't being the Inquisitor make me in charge?"

"On time. Dressed appropriately. Polite."

He growled. "You win this time."

#

"You knew where Hawke was all along!" The shouting was accompanied by a crashing sound.

"You're damed right I did." Varric's voice answered Cassandra's.

"You conniving little shit." He got to the top of the stairs in time to see Cassandra take a swing at Varric.

Varric managed to duck under it. "You kidnapped me. You interrogated me. What did you expect?"

"Hey." Kathan stepped between them. "Enough."

Cassandra glared at him. "You're taking his side?"

"I ain't taking any sides." Kathan shook his head. "And I said, enough."

She stalked a few steps away, and began pacing. "We needed someone to lead this Inquisition. Hawke was our only hope. He was the Champion of Kirkwall. The mages respected him." She pointed at Varric. "And you kept him from us."

"The Inquisition has a leader." Varric pointed at Kathan.

"Hawke would have been at the Conclave. If anyone could have saved Most Holy..."

He sighed. Cassandra had served the Divine for years. Her grief might not have been as visible as Leliana's, but... "You can't change the past, Cassandra." One guy trying had caused a shit load of trouble.

"So I must accept..." She shook her head. "What? That the Maker wanted all this to happen? That He, that He..." She waved a hand. "Varric is a liar, Inquisitor. A snake. Even after the Conclave, when we needed Hawke most, Varric kept him secret."

"He's with us now. We're on the same side." Varric gestured.

"We all know who's side you're on, Varric. It will never be the Inquisition's." She glared.

"Ain't sure you're being all the way fair with that, Rose." Kathan shook his head before turning to Varric. "Any other secrets ya think I should know? Cause now'd be the time."

Varric shook his head. "I understand."

Cassandra turned, and leaned against the railing. "He did bring Hawke. Late, perhaps, but Hawke is with us." She looked down. "As are you."

He gestured for Varric to go, and the dwarf started down the stairs. He took two steps, and then shook his head again. "You know what I think? If Hawke had been at the temple, he'd be dead too. You people have done enough to him."

Kathan leaned on the railing next to Cassandra. She sighed. "I..." She swallowed. "Believed him. He spun his story for me, and I swallowed it. If I'd just explained what was at stake..." She clasped her hands. "If I'd just made him understand..." She turned towards him. "But I didn't, did I? I didn't explain why we needed Hawke. I am such a fool."

"Good thing I still like you." He smiled at her.

"I'm serious." She glared at him.

"You think I'm not?" He tilted his head at her.

"I want you to know, I have no regrets. Maybe if we'd found Hawke, the Maker wouldn't have needed to send you. But He did." She smiled. "I don't know how it will end, but I would have it no other way." She nodded before walking down the stairs.

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"You have candy."

"Do not."

Sera leaped down the staircase to land in front of him. "You have Josephine candy. Gimme."

He held the box to him protectively. "You don't know what I had to do to get this." He glared over his shoulder. "I had to listen to nobles prattle for hours. While wearing a shirt."

"I had to not shoot them. Gimme."

"You probably did something to their saddlebags."

"Lady Ruffles told me not to shoot them. She said nothing about leaving their stuff alone. Gimme."

"Listen, Arrows, I had to judge people. Officially. There was a chair and everything."

She cackled. "Saw. Should have made them all wear stupid hats. Gimme."

They glared at each other. He stuck his hand in the box and handed her one of the wrapped candies. "Go away."

"Don't bother to lock it up, I can pick any lock you have."

"Get your own."

She shoved the candy into her mouth. "Tastier when its stolen."

End  
file.